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Two Roads Diverged: Understanding the Decision-Making Process and Experiences of First-Generation and Low-Income Students Who Chose Different Paths in Pursuit of a Baccalaureate Degree

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TWO ROADS DIVERGED: UNDERSTANDING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION AND LOW-INCOME STUDENTS WHO CHOSE DIFFERENT PATHS IN PURSUIT OF A BACCALAUREATE DEGREE

A Dissertation Presented

by

JOHN A. DREW

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ABSTRACT

TWO ROADS DIVERGED: UNDERSTANDING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION AND LOW-INCOME STUDENTS WHO CHOSE DIFFERENT PATHS IN PURSUIT OF A BACCALAUREATE DEGREE

May 2018

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Despite gains in expanding the student pipeline to postsecondary education, first-generation and low-income (FGLI) students complete college at disproportionately lower rates and have limited access to the resources necessary to make informed decisions about higher education. Research has shown that FGLI students are less likely to apply to college after completing high school, and when they do, they often enroll in institutions that are less selective than they were academically qualified to attend. Moreover, although access to higher education has expanded, the increased concentration of students at community colleges has not led to increases in earned credentials.

This study used two parallel phenomenological inquiries to explore the college decision-making processes and first-year experiences of two groups of FGLI students

pursuing a baccalaureate degree: students who completed a summer college-access program before entering a four-year institution, and students who attended a community college. Findings from the study revealed that FGLI students often sought the support of guidance counselors during the college choice process, but the degree to which community college and four-year college attendees accessed this resource varied. Additionally, four-year college attendees provided strong evidence of having the support of parents, siblings, or peers who helped influence their college enrollment decisions.

This study also examined the first-year experiences of FGLI students and found that community college enrollees spoke highly of their experience, felt more comfortable navigating higher education independently, and remained steadfast about their desire to pursue a bachelor's degree; however they demonstrated less engagement with the college community and were uncertain about where they would be ultimately complete their studies. Participants who had completed a summer college-access program were more engaged on campus with administrators and peers, had a better understanding of the support resources available, and gained confidence in how to approach college-level work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the heart of this study is the concept of social capital—the idea that we can gain valuable resources from the networks to which we have access. The process of writing this dissertation opened my eyes to the strong network that surrounds me and also provided an opportunity to develop new networks.

When I began this program with cohort 2012—my community of scholars—I did not fully understanding what a cohort-model would offer. I quickly realized, however, that it was an amazing source of support and wisdom. I appreciate the cohort's diverse views and the ways we have intellectually challenged each other over the past six years. You inspired me to continue pursuing this goal and helped me grow in ways I could never have imagined.

To my committee, Dr. Parker, Dr. Blanco, and Dr. Ashley, thank you for understanding why this study was important and for remaining optimistic throughout the process. During those moments when I felt like I was losing my way, I drew from your enthusiasm and encouragement, which kept me moving forward.

To my friends, family, and co-workers, you have no idea how helpful your check-ins were. From simple questions like, "Are you done yet" to more formal support, this process opened my eyes to the amazing group of people I have around me. Specifically, I owe a debt of gratitude to Shelby for her inspiration and for letting me stop by her office to share how I was feeling and for letting me ask, "Is this normal?" Kerry, you have served as my sounding board so many times, especially the day I asked if we could sit in the atrium and I could try to tell you what I thought this all meant.

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To the students who participated in this study, thank you for telling your story. It is through your voice and experience that we can begin to make college an equitable experience. To the administrators who work with students in the summer college-access

program, you are doing amazing work. Continue to be the agents whom first-generation and low-income students need.

Access to college is not enough. Access to just any college is not enough. We must continue to challenge ourselves to make sure underserved populations are fairly distributed across higher education and remain focused on completion.

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INTRODUCTION

A cursory look at enrollment increases in postsecondary education since the 1970s may lead one to declare victory for undergraduate student access. Indeed, in 1970, approximately 8.5 million students were enrolled in degree-granting institutions; by 2012, enrollment had ballooned to over 20 million (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). However, this ostensible success only tells part of the story. Masked by double-digit increases in enrollment are the hidden realities that community colleges have accounted for a majority of the growth in higher education, and enrollment increases have been disproportional across diverse populations of students (Ma & Baum, 2016). Both of these factors highlight the need to further investigate student access to higher education and to consider how recent trends contribute to college progression and completion rates.

The two-year community college sector has historically shouldered a majority of the growth in higher education. Enrollment at community colleges increased from 1.2 million in 1965 to 5.5 million in 1995 (Coley, 2000) and now tops 7.3 million (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Two-year public colleges comprise the largest sector of higher education, accounting for 42% of the undergraduate student population enrolled in a degree granting institution in 2014 (Ma & Baum, 2016). Open-admission policies, low tuition and fees, flexible course offerings, and geographic proximity have made community colleges an

attractive option for many students, including populations who are often underrepresented and underserved in higher education. Far fewer students of color, first-generation, and low-income students would enroll in higher education if it were not for the opportunities available within the community college sector (Long & Kurlaender, 2009).

The success of community colleges in increasing student access to higher education have now put them in the crosshairs of state and federal policymakers focusing on degree completion, not simply access. Many critics argue that community colleges are not fulfilling their mission, citing low associate-degree completion rates and low transfer rates. Students enter community colleges for many different purposes, including workforce training and developmental education, but the vast majority—estimated at 81% in one study—enter with the goal of eventually obtaining a bachelor's degree (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). However, a study conducted by the Pell Institute produced findings that contradicted this optimistic aim. The institute followed a representative sample of the three million students enrolled in higher education for the first time in the 1995-1996 academic year, and determined that only 10% of students who began at a community college had obtained a bachelor's degree six years later, compared to 58% who began their study at a four-year institution (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Another study of full-time enrolled students revealed that two out of 10 participants received an associate degree within three years, and completion rates were even lower for students enrolled in part-time study, which is common at community colleges (Bragg & Durham, 2012).

Disparities in bachelor's degree-completion rates of students who began their educational careers at community colleges have been attributed to low transfer rates,

changes in students' educational aspirations, and challenges they experience transitioning to a four-year college environment (Alfonso, 2006; Brand, Pfeffer, & Goldrick-Rab, 2012; Doyle, 2009; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Reynolds, 2012; Reynolds & DesJardins, 2009; Stephan, Rosenbaum, & Person, 2009). Studies have also found that community college students behave differently than students at four-year institutions. Xu, Jaggars, and Fletcher (2016) compared academically similar students in community colleges to those at non-selective four-year colleges and found that community college students were less likely to enroll full-time and took many more developmental education courses. By the end of the second year, community college students in the study had completed three fewer credits than the students at four-year colleges; the researchers also noticed a difference in college-level course completion as early as the first semester (Xu, Jaggars, & Fletcher, 2016). By controlling for any variance in prior academic accomplishment or socioeconomic status differences among students, Xu et al. (2016) were able to attribute enrollment behavior differences to the community college environment.

The degree to which community colleges fulfill their mission is particularly salient for first-generation and low-income (FGLI) students, who disproportionally enroll in two-year public colleges relative to their population demographic. Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that 53% of FGLI students enrolled in two-year public colleges and only 34% enrolled in four-year public or private institutions, compared to the 54% of non-FGLI students who enrolled directly in four-year institutions. A more recent study conducted by Ma and Baum (2016) compared the composition of dependent students in different sectors of higher education and found that 31% of low-income students were enrolled in a community college, while 22% and 18% were enrolled in four-year public

and four-year private colleges, respectively. Similar enrollment patterns existed for first-generation students, with 36% enrolled in community colleges compared to 24% at four-year public and 19% at four-year private institutions.

FGLI students are particularly disadvantaged within higher education, and enrollment patterns have contributed to lower completion rates for this group. Bailey and Dynarski (2011) compared high school graduates between 1979 and 1982 to high school graduates between 1997 and 2000, and found that college entry and completion rates had increased. However, the college entry gap for between students in the bottom- and top-income quartiles increased from 39% in the 1979-1982 cohort to 51% in the 1997-2000 cohort. The same study determined that bachelor's degree completion for students in the top-income quartile increased by 18% over the 20-year period, while completion rate among students in the bottom-income quartile increased by a meager 4% (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Engle and Tinto (2008) found that first-generation students were four times more likely to leave higher education after the first year; moreover, they found that after six years, only 11% of FGLI students had earned a bachelor's degree compared to 55% of their more advantaged peers. Even more staggering was the finding that FGLI students were seven times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree if they started at a four-year institution, but because so few do, their completion numbers continue to be low (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

FGLI students are more likely to exhibit one or more of the risk factors associated with leaving higher education prior to completion, including delayed enrollment, enrolling on a part-time basis, and working full-time while in college. Berkner, He and Cataldi (2003) examined the risk factors associated with leaving higher education and

found that 75% of students enrolled in a community college had exhibited one or more risk factors, compared to just 14% of students who began at a four-year college. Such studies provide strong evidence that the risk factors associated with leaving higher education without a degree are exacerbated by enrollment in community college and are reduced when enrolled in a four-year college.

In addition to representing the majority of community colleges enrollees, FGLI students are also the primary audience targeted for college access programs, which focus on expanding awareness and exposure to higher education. Although there is disagreement among reseachers about which components of a college access program are most effective at increasing postsecondary opportunities for FGLI students, there is broad acceptance that outreach efforts to increase students' aspirations and improve their academic preparation have been effective (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). Due to the breadth of services available to students, however, evaluation of college access programs is difficult. College access programs are generally categorized by their funding source, including federally supported TRIO programs such as Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services; state-supported programs like Florida's College Reach Out Program; privately supported programs such as the Gates Millennium Scholars Program; and programs supported by specific institutions. In general, assessment of the federal TRIO programs has reported increased college enrollment rates of FGLI students as well as positive outcomes in credits earned, retention rates, and graduation rates within this group (Engle, 2007).

Yet, irrespective of FGLI students' enrollment in a community college or participation in a college access program, their plight is best summarized by Engle and Tinto (2008):

> It is no longer enough to be concerned only about whether low-income and first-generation students go to college. We also must be concerned about where and how they go to college—and the experiences they have once enrolled—to ensure that this population can stay there through the completion of a degree, particularly the bachelor's degree. (p. 5)

Problem Statement

Despite gains in expanding the pipeline of students attending postsecondary institutions, underserved populations—particularly low socioeconomic status students and students who are the first in their family to attend college—complete postsecondary education at disproportionately lower rates (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Perna, 2006; Perna et al., 2008) and have limited access to the resources necessary to make informed college decisions (Avery & Kane, 2004; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000, 2001; Perna, 2006; Plank & Jordan, 2001). Research has shown that FGLI students are less likely to apply to and enroll in a higher education institution after completing high school, (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001), and when they do, they often enroll in an institution that is less selective than they were academically qualified to attend (Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). Approximately 75% of FGLI students begin their higher education career in a two-year college; yet, when they enroll in a four-year institution, they are seven times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). FGLI students who enroll at a community college are less likely than their advantaged peers to transfer to a four-year

college, and ultimately only 5% receive a bachelor's degree within six years (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Although access to higher education has expanded, the increased concentration of students at community colleges has not led to increases in degree completion, and in some cases may hinder attempts to increase completion rates by diverting students to insitutions that have lower completion rates (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

There are many efforts underway to minimize the enrollment and completion gaps among underrepresented and underserved students in higher education, including initiatives focused on improving alignment of K-12 with higher education. College access programs play an important role in such efforts and have a long history of providing supplemental support to disadvantaged groups. Access programs not only provide academic support, but also attempt to engender attitudes and cultures that promote college enrollment (Gullatt & Jan, 2003).

Current research has examined the impacts that college access programs and community colleges have on baccalaureate degree attainment, but it has not fully explored the ways in which college progression and completion for underserved students are tied to the decisions made during the college-search and college-choice process. Completing a summer college access program at a four-year institution or attending a community college represent very different entry points in the pursuit of a baccalaureate degree for FGLI students. To date, however, no research has explored how students decide to participate in either a college access program or a community college, nor has it examined the unique experience of FGLI students as they follow each of these pathways. Moving beyond access and focusing on the college-completion agenda requires

comparative data that illuminate the implications of a student choosing to attend a community college or instead participating in a college access program.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of my study was to understand the decision-making process and experiences of FGLI students who had aspirations to obtain a bachelor's degree but who initially were not academically admissible to their four-year institution of choice. Many students whose cumulative GPA or standardized test scores do not meet minimum state or institutional admission requirements are offered conditional acceptance to a four-year college upon completion of a summer college-access program, or they have the option of attending an open-admission community college. I used qualitative research methods to examine the college-choice process and experiences of FGLI students who followed each of these pathways, and to illustrate how members of each group progressed through their first year of higher education. In addition, I focused on the relationships FGLI students developed with administrators, advisers, faculty, and peers during their first year of college. Utilizing two parallel phenomenological inquiries, I also sought to understand the shared experiences of FGLI students participating in a college access program that conditionally accepts students into a four-year college compared to those who chose alternatively to attend a community college.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the current study:

1. How do FGLI students with aspirations to obtain a bachelor's degree decide between enrolling in a community college or enrolling directly in a four-year institution by completing a summer college-access program?

2. How does the first-year experience for FGLI students who attend a community college compare to those who complete a summer college-access program and subsequently enroll in a four-year institution?
    a. How do the differences in FGLI students' experiences manifest in the relationships they foster with faculty, staff, and peers?

Significance

The higher education policy agenda has evolved from one centered on expanding access to one focused primarily on college completion. President Obama exemplified this emphasis on completion in his "American Graduation Initiative," through which he vowed that the U.S. would once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. Bragg and Durham (2012) examined the impact that an increased focus on college completion could have on access by reviewing three initiatives: "Achieving the Dream," an initiative undertaken by the Lumina Foundation; the "Equity Scorecard," created by the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California; and "Pathways to Results," developed by the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at the University of Illinois. The authors acknowledged that a general unease could be felt across all sectors of higher education, including community colleges, which are under pressure to not only maintain access but also increase completion rates. At the conclusion of their article, Bragg and Durham (2012) highlighted the importance of policymakers and practitioners working together to improve access, equity, and completion for underserved students.

The current study pursued a similar vein. Increased focus on college completion is necessary to ensure that all students have an equitable experience in higher education, but

it must be achieved without impeding access. A closer look at the college decision-making process for FGLI students and a better understanding of how their experiences differ depending on the pathway they pursue will yield important data for state policymakers and practitioners to consider and utilize. The results of this study could also help to improve completion rates for first-generation and low-income students, ultimately contributing to an increase in national averages overall.

A study conducted in 2004 by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) found that 32 states were using retention and graduation rates as well as other metrics to measure student performance and to help allocate funding and resources. It is no surprise, therefore, that state offices like the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE) are increasingly devoting more effort and funding to "transfer pathways" that better align community colleges with four-year institutions and incentivize the completion of associate degrees. Legislative mandates have resulted in a unified system of academic transfer, a common course numbering system, and seamless transfer systems. The Massachusetts DHE's *MassTransfer Pathways Implementation Report* outlined the progress other state systems have made in system-wide transfer programs and called for a unified system of academic transfer in Massachusetts. Specifically, the report recognized Tennessee, New York, and Maryland for their accomplishments in creating more seamless, unified systems that ensure transferability of credits between public institutions as well as to private universities within the state.

The work that state offices in Maryland, Tennessee, New York, and, more recently, Massachusetts have done is admirable and worthwhile. Many of the studies that have looked at the challenges students experience transitioning from one college campus

to another have highlighted loss of credit as a significant hurdle. However, the challenges to completing a degree are vast, and if state higher education boards are going to dedicate resources to improving the two-year to four-year transfer pathway, stakeholders must be confident that the transfer pathway is the best opportunity for underserved students to complete a baccalaureate degree.

In addition to state higher education boards, practitioners, including those working in high school guidance offices as well as nonprofit organizations, will benefit from an understanding of how the experiences of FGLI students who begin in a college access program may differ from those who begin alternatively at a community college. My research helps explain why students select one pathway over another and how their decisioins ultimately shape their experience in higher education—thereby providing practitioners with the valuable information needed to best advise students.

Finally, this study has the potential to help FGLI students better understand the ways constraints in their college decision-making process may impact their college experience. Persistence and completion rates vary across institutional type and from institution to institution, and they are affected by both institutional-level as well as student-specific factors. FGLI students are already saddled with student-level disadvantages, including demographic, socioeconomic, and human capital factors that impact their likelihood to persist in and graduate from college. However, it is also important for this population to recognize the institutional-level factors that could hamper or improve persistence and completion. For instance, Titus (2004) concluded that when student-level factors were controlled for in his study, institutional differences in campus size, residential offerings, institutional commitment, and selectivity impacted persistence.

The study results will allow policymakers, practitioners, and students to connect research that explores college choice and college experience in order to push the larger agenda of completion beyond just access. If research continues to treat choice and experience as mutually exclusive, the conversation around access and completion will not evolve.

Key Concepts

Prior to discussing my exploration of college choice, college access programs, and transfer pathways, it is important to define the populations this research explored and to clarify terms used throughout the study.

The challenges faced by underrepresented and underserved college students warrant further review and understanding; however, this study focused on the research and literature pertaining specifically to FGLI students. There is no single definition of a first-generation student; a review of prior research reveals three different characterizations: (1) neither of the student's parents completed a college degree; (2) the student is the first in his or her family to attend college; (3) neither of the student's parents had any college experience (McConnell, 2000). The definition used for this study is the one most commonly used in the literature, and is also the one used by the federal government: first-generation students are those whose parents have no prior experience with postsecondary education (McConnell, 2000; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Extensive research on first-generation students has shown that they are more likely to be low-income and non-White (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005), and their retention and graduation rates lag behind students who come from families that have attended college (Ishitani, 2006). When they do attend college, they are more likely to attend less selective

institutions, including community colleges (Thayer, 2000). There are a number of factors that have been shown to negatively affect the college-going chances of students whose parents have not completed any education beyond high school, including lower levels of academic preparation, lower educational aspirations, less encouragement and support to attend college (particularly from parents), less knowledge about the college application process, and fewer resources to pay for college (Engle, 2007).

When pursuing postsecondary education, low-income students—defined in this study as those who apply for financial aid and are eligible to receive a Pell grant—experience many of the same disadvantages as first-generation students. Research has indicated that, regarding the pursuit of higher education, the gap between low-income and upper-income students has actually widened (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Thayer, 2000), and there is less socioeconomic diversity at most selective institutions than racial and ethnic diversity (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). Public policy aimed at increasing the participation and completion rates of FGLI students has been met with mixed responses, and additional research on ways to improve these students' success in postsecondary education is needed.

The research on college access programs is extensive and, as will be discussed later in this study, does not have the benefit of a particular schema to aid in its review. Even the terminology used to describe the support that students receive prior to enrolling in college varies widely, including referring to services as "early intervention programs," "pre-collegiate academic development programs," "pre-college outreach and early intervention programs," and "college access programs" (Gandara, 2001; Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Perna & Swail, 2001). An additional area of research around "summer bridge

programs"—a specific type of college access program—highlights a wide range of services targeting an even larger student audience. According to Kezar (2000), summer bridge programs can range from providing academic support, time management, and career counseling, to introducing students to college expectations and general education studies. Summer bridge programs do not service a common population, and each one has been designed to serve a specific niche. Therefore, it is not uncommon to find individual programs that serve ESL, international, gifted, or STEM students (Kezar, 2000).

The term *college access program* refers to a broad category of direct services that students and families receive regarding college admissions, mentoring, college visits, advocacy, academic enrichment, tutoring, college entrance exam preparation, and counseling (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). The literature around college access programs highlights school-based services that attempt to make broad curriculum changes, but focuses more specifically on student-centered services that impact individual students' experience. As will be discussed later in sections related to the research design, I selected two specific institutionally based summer programs for this study, which will be referred to under the broad category of "summer college-access programs."

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study centered on three areas of research: college choice, college access programs, and community college and transfer pathways. An exploration of college-choice models and factors leading to selection help explain FGLI students' experiences in higher education. It also brings to light the unique role college access programs and community colleges play in the support of underserved students. A review of the history and effectiveness of college access programs and community college transfer pathways is pertinent to the study of FGLI students since so many begin their higher education experience via one of these avenues.

College Choice

As higher education has expanded and the importance of a college degree in society has increased, the need to understand college choice has become imperative. More specifically, college-choice research has shown how access to higher education has become stratified across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines, and how it has informed the decisions of college officials addressing shifts in the college-going population and in the economy. The study of college choice increased in the late 1970s and continued through the 1990s, when colleges began experiencing deficits and bleak enrollment outlooks. During this time, colleges became engaged in market-oriented activities and

attempted to better understand individual student behavior to more successfully recruit prospective students and combat enrollment declines (Paulsen, 1990).

Before reviewing the various models that have been used to understand college choice, it is worth considering the degree to which students make a conscious decision to attend college and how environmental factors impact the process. This chapter examines econometric and sociological models, and concludes with Perna's (2006) combined conceptual model of student college choice, which draws on both approaches. The exploration of college choice concludes with a synthesis of how access to information, high school factors, and parental involvement influence college choice.

Some researchers believe that the concept of college choice is socially constructed, as it implies that there is a conscious decision to be made. Habitus, which relates to preferences or behaviors shaped during childhood, often determines whether a student makes a formal decision to pursue postsecondary education (Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010). According to Bourdieu (as cited in Reay, 2004) an understanding of habitus helps recognize that individuals "contain within themselves their past and present position in the social structure" (p. 434) and that individual histories are shaped by what is occurring around them. Individuals actively engage in their social worlds, which are predefined by broader racial, gender, and class relations (Reay, 2004). Since students' decisions, preferences, and attitudes are conditioned by their environment (Perna & Titus, 2005), the degree to which they consciously make a choice to attend college is also a product of their environment.

Many college choice studies have relied on habitus to explain how college choice decisions are made (Nora, 2004; Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005), including a series of

studies that focused on the impact of financial aid and cost on college enrollment. Paulsen and St. John (2002) maintained that most students do not have unlimited geographic, social, and economic mobility, and the decisions they make are influenced mainly by factors within their educational and familial setting. An additional study of the relationship among college cost, financial aid, and enrollment decisions determined that a family's decision to pay for college is not impacted solely by monetary factors but also by the surrounding community and social class (McDonough & Calderone, 2006).

College choice researchers have focused on factors influencing the decision to attend college, the factors that contribute to the selection of a particular institutional type, or in some cases both. Earlier studies of college choice, including those conducted by Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) and Paulsen (1990) generally focused their research on understanding what influences impacts one's desire to enroll in college. Their studies would later investigate factors that influenced attendance at specific types of institutions as well as the implications of those decisions. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) defined the phase during which a student determines whether to continue his or her formal education beyond high school as the *predisposition phase*. Hossler et al. (1989) identified 12 factors that influence the predisposition phase, including: family socioeconomic status, student academic ability and achievement, race and ethnicity, gender, parental levels of education, family residence, parental encouragement and support, encouragement from high school counselors and teachers, peer encouragement and support, student educational aspirations and career plans, the quality of high school, a student's academic track, and the labor market and increased rates of return. A significant amount of research has been conducted relating to these latter factors and has contributed

to our understanding of inequities existing among in college choice. Yet, as Perna (2006) determined in her review of college choice literature, the 30 percentage-point gap in enrollment rates between low-income and high-income students was the same in the mid-2000s as it was in the 1960s, and that enrollment rates for African Americans and Hispanics continues to be lower than those of White students. In an effort to move beyond a mere conversation about access and instead focus more specifically on equity, this study concentrated less on the factors that influence FGLI students to enroll in postsecondary education institutions and more on the type of institutions this population attends.

All studies of college choice, whether focusing on the predisposition stage or the choice stage, have been complicated by the array of theoretical and methodological approaches used to understand the phenomenon (Hossler et al., 1989; Perna, 2006). Most college-choice research has adhered to one of three models: econometric, sociological, and/or a combined approach.

Econometric Approach

In an econometric model of college choice, students weigh various factors and attempt to maximize the expected utility of the decision to be made (Hossler et al., 1989). According to this approach, students make rational decisions and weigh all of the associated costs of attending college with the associated benefits (Perna, 2006). Expected costs not only include tuition, room and board, and books; some models also consider lost earnings while in college. These costs must be weighed against future expected earnings in order to determine if the perceived benefit of attending a particular college outweighs another college option, or attending college at all.

Human capital theory and the study of human capital investment—addressed in Perna's (2006) review of college-choice literature but noticeably absent in the Hossler et al.'s (1989)—have been linked to econometric models. Human capital investment includes the intangible assets that increase an individual's resources and ultimately impact future income (Becker, 2009). Education or training are the most important investments of human capital, evidenced in study after study demonstrating that educated or skilled workers are more likely to achieve increased earnings (Becker, 2009).

Many quantitative studies have used human capital investment models to understand college choice. For instance, Avery and Hoxby (2004) surveyed over 3,240 high-achieving students who had applied to selective institutions in an effort to understand how financial aid and merit scholarships impacted college enrollment decisions. They wanted to determine if students behave like rational investors in their own human capital when comparing financial aid packages and selecting an institution (Avery & Hoxby, 2004). They found that students' decision to select a college was impacted by the selectivity of the institution and the amount awarded in grants, loans, and work study. Although, in general, students adhered to rational economic decision making, students responded in unexpected ways to loans and work-study. Specifically, Avery and Hoxby found that a $1,000 increase in grants resulted in an 11% increase in the probability that a student would matriculate at an institution, whereas a $1,000 increase in loans and work-study resulted in a 7% and 13% increase in the probability of matriculation, respectively. The researchers investigated many other factors, including the effects of tuition increases, parental education, and family income level on matriculation. Ultimately, Avery and Hoxby determined that students from high-income

families, who had attended private high schools, and whose parents had attended more selective colleges were less attracted by aid. Understanding the decision-making process, and whether FGLI students respond rationally to financial aid and merit scholarships, was central to my study.

Long (2004) adopted a similar human capital investment approach in her review of college choice over the past 30 years. She wanted to determine how students decide between colleges and, more specifically, how cost, academic quality, and distance factored into students' decision to enroll in college over three decades—with 1972, 1982, and 1992 serving as markers. Except for low-income students, college costs did not explain the difference in enrollment for students in the 1992 group. Long suggested that the role of college costs may have become less of a factor with the increase in financial aid programs and a greater appreciation for the value of a college degree. The results also indicated that the importance of quality had grown over the three decades as had academic preparation and college planning resources in high school.

Sociological Perspective

Sociological, or status-attainment, models are concerned with the factors that affect academic preparation and educational aspirations. From a sociological perspective, students are predisposed to college as a result of their environment and educational opportunities (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001), and social mobility is a byproduct of the restraints and opportunities available in secondary school (Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010). More recent research has also looked at the influence social and cultural capital have on college choice models.

Many studies have investigated the impact external factors, such as parental involvement, high school environment, and peers, have on the educational aspirations of college-going students. Using a nationally representative sample of high school seniors from the Educational Longitudinal Survey, Engberg and Wolniak (2010) studied the effects of student-level characteristics and high school contexts on postsecondary enrollment. Student-level variables were grouped into categories and included highest level of mathematics, total number of Advanced Placement courses, and the role parents and peers played in guiding the student (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). School-level variables helped account for the access that students had to various forms of capital and included the socioeconomic status of the high school environment, student-to-guidance-counselor ratio, and a measure of the college-going climate of the high school (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). Findings from the student-level factors that were most relevant to this literature review include a discovery that, across two- and four-year colleges, students increasingly decided to attend college as socioeconomic status increased and when students received greater encouragement from parents and peers (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). Findings pertaining to the socioeconomic status of the high school environment were similar to the individual student variables, where an increase in income correlated with increases in college enrollment (Engberg &Wolniak, 2010).

The econometric and sociological approaches, however, are limited in their ability to explain differences in college choice decisions. Econometric models assume rational decision-making and are not able to account for why students have access to different information, and they do not take into account the effects of family income, race, and ethnicity on college choice (Perna, 2006). Sociological approaches provide much more

insight into the variations of college choice along socioeconomic and demographic lines, but do little to enhance understanding of how college choice decisions are ultimately made (Perna, 2006).

Combined Conceptual Models of College Choice

The limitations of econometric and sociological approaches have prompted researchers to create several combined conceptual models, including Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice. The model comprises the multiple "layers" in which decisions are made, including the individual's habitus, school and community, the higher education context, and the broader social, economic, and policy context (Perna, 2006). At the center of the model, students may still weigh the expected benefits of college with the expected costs, but those considerations operate within a broader construct that takes into account the student's family background, high school experience, and social forces. Perna's conceptual model of student college choice served as a conceptual framework for my study and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Factors Impacting College Choice

The decision to attend college has traditionally been described as a three-stage process that includes predisposition, search, and choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000, 2001; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Although different factors impact each stage, they are all interconnected, and their cumulative effect impacts how students conduct their college search and ultimately make their enrollment decision.

Regardless of the model or conceptual lens through which college choice is analyzed, academic preparation is a primary influence on a student's predisposition to

attend college, but it does not explain all the factors impacting college choice (Perna & Titus, 2004). Previous studies that held academic qualifications constant have reported differences in college enrollment decisions based on the accumulation of social capital, often gained from parental figures and the high school environment (Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Perna & Titus, 2005).

Access to college choice information, increased parental involvement, and attendance at high schools with strong college-going cultures all contribute to the accumulation of social capital, which in turn increases the likelihood that a student will apply and be admitted to a four-year college or selective institution (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Conversely, students who have limited access to accurate information—those with the lowest socioeconomic status or who are first-generation—often choose to attend colleges that are less selective. Researchers have described this phenomenon as "undermatching" and have determined that although undermatching is prevalent across all groups, FGLI students are more likely to attend an institution that is less selective when they were academically eligible to attend a more selective institution. (Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). The worry is that undermatching can result in longer college completion times and lower completion rates for certain college-going subgroups.

The study of social capital—the notion "that involvement and participation in groups can have positive consequences for the individual and the community" (Portes, 2000, p. 2)—is not a new concept and was rooted in the early thinking of many sociologists. Bourdieu (1985) divided social capital into two elements: (1) the relationships individuals have that provide access to resources, and (2) the amount and quality of those resources (Portes, 2000). Bourdieu believed that some individuals are

more advantaged because of the access they have to certain networks but that structural barriers could also limit individuals not in a dominant position (Perna, 2006). Coleman's (1988) perspective on social capital focuses on the relationship between actors, particularly children and their parents.

The availability of college information is important to the college choice process regardless of a student's academic background and has been found to vary across socioeconomic status. Lower income students generally have fewer avenues to college choice information than students in upper socioeconomic backgrounds (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). More specifically, Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) posited that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have less information about college costs, requirements, and institutional types.

The high school environment also impacts the college choice process differently for FGLI and racially diverse students, and has been found to structurally determine educational decisions (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Perna & Titus, 2005). Underrepresented students often develop their college-going perceptions in secondary school and are more impacted by the college-going climate of their high school (Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010). A key contributor to the college choice process within the high school environment is the high school counselor, who can serve as a resource for college information and help influence students' educational aspirations by creating a college-going climate (Perna et al., 2008). Unfortunately, student-to-counselor ratios are high, especially in public and urban high schools, and counselors often experience role ambiguity as a result of having to perform multiple functions (McDonough, 2005; Perna et al., 2008;). School counselors can be particularly useful in

providing assistance and information to students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students (Perna et al., 2008).

Cabrera and La Nasa (2000, 2001) identified parental involvement as an important factor in college choice and divided it into two dimensions: motivational and proactive. Parents in middle-income and upper-income families often drive the college choice process, assisting with applications and college financial planning, drawing on their own experiences with higher education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Students from low-income families whose parents have not attended college are less likely to enroll in college, and when they do enroll, there is a greater likelihood that they will attend a less selective, lower-priced institution (Perna, 2008).

College Access Programs

Rresearch on college access programs is broad and dates back to the 1960s, with the introduction of the federal TRIO programs, including Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services. The National College Access Program database indicates that more than 2,500 college access programs exist in the United States, operating at either the federal, state, institutional, or private level. Researchers and policymakers generally agree that

> outreach efforts that increase students' aspirations, expose them to the rigors of college at an early age, and provide interventions aimed at increasing their academic performance have been instrumental in illuminating the barriers to equitable opportunity for higher education. (Gullatt & Jan, 2003, p. 2)

However, there has been less agreement on when services should begin, what services should be provided, and how to measure the effectiveness of such programs. Indeed, the

broad range of programs and services offered nationally and the lack of a common approach to studying college access programs make a review of the relevant literature challenging.

This section of the literature review begins with a brief overview of the history of college access programs and highlights the four largest programs, including Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, and GEAR UP. The 2012 National Survey of Pre-College Outreach Programs identified that almost one third of college access programs are federal TRIO programs; thus, it is important to understand their history and effectiveness. The next section introduces two national surveys that categorize college access programs, one conducted in 2001 by the College Board, and an updated survey conducted in 2012 by the Educational Policy Institute. The surveys outline the type of college access programs offered nationwide, how they are organized administratively, and the types of services provided. The preceding two sections lay the groundwork for a review of studies conducted since 2003 that have examined the effectiveness of college access programs and identified key programmatic elements. Any review of this topic would be incomplete without underscoring the challenges associated with measuring program effectiveness; therefore, this review also considers the questions that the researchers in each study raise about the usefulness and rigor of college access program evaluations.

One challenge of studying college access programs is that researchers often address the programs under broad categories; therefore, it is difficult to understand at the micro level the differences between individual programs. As noted earlier, the current study focused on conditional acceptance college access programs that are often made

available to students at the time of admission to a university and conducted during the summer prior to enrollment (in the fall semester). In particular, the study looked at college access programs that students were granted acceptance into, under the stipulation of completion, in order for students to gain access to a four-year college. This category of college access program is unique since the cost of the program may be subsidized by state or federal funding but is most often covered by the institution. Offering the program in the summer prior to enrollment and the connection to a specific higher education institution also differentiates this category from other college access programs. As a result, conditional acceptance college access programs have not been studied deeply; moreover, what is understood about these programs is generally evaluative and has oftentimes been examined only from the vantage of the sponsoring institution. Since these programs draw from other state and federal college programs, it is beneficial to review the full gamut of college access programs.

Federal College Access Programs

Three college access programs grew out of the federal government's response to the War on Poverty and its dedication to providing broader access to higher education: Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services. Collectively, these initiatives comprised the original federal TRIO programs, and despite adopting different approaches, they share a commitment to increasing disadvantaged students' completion of secondary education and their entrance and completion of postsecondary education. Reauthorizations of the 1965 Higher Education Act led to the creation of additional programs, including the Educational Opportunity Centers, Training Program for Federal

TRIO Programs, Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program, Upward Bound Math/Science program, and GEAR UP.

Upward Bound is the largest and longest running college access program, providing academic instruction, tutoring, and counseling for FGLI students in Grades 9-12. To be eligible for federal funding, two thirds of program participants must be low-income and potential first-generation college students. Most Upward Bound programs are multi-year initiatives and include a residential summer component on a college campus. The goal of Upward Bound programs is to increase the rate of postsecondary attendance and completion of underrepresented students. Upward Bound has grown tremendously over the last 50 years and currently has an operating budget totaling nearly $267 million.

Upward Bound is the most broadly studied college access program, and its impact on academic preparation and grades has been mixed. However, studies of Upward Bound students conducted throughout the 1970s, 1980,s and 1990s demonstrated increased attendance in postsecondary institutions for program participants compared to non-program participants (Fields, 2001; Moore, Fasciano, Jacobson, Myers, & Waldman, 1997). Harris, Nathan, and Marksteiner (2014) maintained that this success helped the program expand to more than 953 sites serving over 64,000 students by 2011, but it also led the U.S. Department of Education to fund a decade-long review of the effectiveness of the program conducted by Mathematica Policy Research (MPR). Based on its findings, MPR issued a series of reports—heralded by some as the best evaluation to date of federal college preparation programs and criticized by others for poor sampling design (Harris, Nathan, & Marksteiner, 2014)—suggesting that Upward Bound had no detectable effect on the rate of overall postsecondary enrollment, the type or selectivity of

institution attended, or the likelihood that program participants would earn bachelor's degrees (Seftor, Mamun, & Schirm, 2009). The MPR report findings became the impetus for cutting Upward Bound funding and exploring other mechanisms for providing college access resources and information. Analysis of the MPR reports revealed issues with the sampling design and sampling weights, which resulted in an overreliance on one particular site in the evaluation. In fact, it was ultimately determined by researchers critical of the MPR report that students benefited from the resources provided by Upward Bound staff during the predisposition and college search stages (Rogers, 2012).

Talent Search, established in 1965 as one of the original TRIO programs, provides high school-aged students with information about high school course selection and also counsels students on the financial aid process and career opportunities. Since 2002, the budget for Talent Search has exceeded $130 million. Unlike Upward Bound sites, each of which typically serves 50-75 students, Talent Search programs often serve over a thousand students annually.

A 2000 study funded by the U.S. Department of Education and conducted by Mathematica Policy Research compared of Talent Search program participants to non-program participants in Florida, Indiana, and Texas. Although not all of the differences in participation and non-participation behavior could be attributed to Talent Search, there were some statistically significant differences in the behavior of program participants (Constantine, Seftor, Martin, Silva, & Myers, 2006). Talent Search participants were more likely to apply for financial aid, enroll in a two- or four-year public institution in their state compared to non-program participants. A longitudinal study of Talent Search participants at the University of Tennessee Knoxville between 1980 and 1989 reported

similar findings (Brewer & Landers, 2005). Brewer and Landers (2005) compared Talent Search participants to a control group of non-participants and found that program participants enrolled in higher education at double the rate and were significantly more likely to enroll in four-year colleges. Although the results pertained to just one Talent Search program and were not generalizable to all programs, the study did provide evidence that program components can help remove barriers to higher education for FGLI students.

With an operating budget exceeding $291 million, Student Support Services (SSS) is focused on implementing strategies for students enrolled in higher education institutions, with the goal of improving retention and graduation rates of disadvantaged students. Although services vary, the most common include academic counseling and peer tutoring. Many studies have been conducted measuring the effectiveness of SSS programs. For example, a national study conducted in 1997 compared 2,900 participants to 2,900 comparable non-participants to determine the effect SSS programs had on students' grades, the number of credits they earned, and their persistence at the university (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Rak, 1997). Study findings showed a small but positive and statistically significant increase in all three indicators (Chaney et al., 1997). The study revealed that the degree of impact was positively correlated to a student's level of participation (Chaney et al., 1997), despite limited contact with program participants and the modest services provided. A follow-up study looked at the same group of students to determine the impact SSS had on retention and graduation rates, as well as two-year to four-year transfer rates. Findings revealed that participants in SSS programs were more likely to be retained in college from year one to year two and had higher degree-

completion rates, while program participation had no impact on transfer rates (Chaney, 2010).

Signed into law by the Clinton administration in 1998, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) was the first federal program to focus on middle schools. In contrast to TRIO programs, which have an individual, student-centered approach, GEAR UP utilizes school-based interventions, centering on curricular changes to ensure that every student has access to a pre-college curriculum (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). The creation of GEAR UP marked a shift in how college access programs were administered, requiring collaboration between local educational agencies, community partners, and postsecondary institutions. Although it is beyond the scope of this literature review to fully consider the shift from student-centered interventions to school-based interventions, it is important to recognize that GEAR UP represented that beginning (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). GEAR UP provides outreach to students, parents, and teachers at high-poverty schools through tutoring, mentoring, field trips, college awareness, parent education, and teacher training. To be eligible to receive funding, programs must begin in the 7th grade and are delivered to an entire grade cohort, although individual participation is voluntary (Standing, Judkins, Keller, & Shimshak, 2008).

Skeptics of GEAR UP have criticized the program for offering duplicate services provided under the umbrella of TRIO programs and have also expressed weariness as funding for TRIO programs has shifted to support GEAR UP (Fields, 2001). However, GEAR Up has enjoyed its own success and, in 2014, had an annual budget exceeding $301 million. A 2008 evaluation of the program utilized a quasi-experimental design and attempted to capture program-descriptive data and to evaluate student and parental

outcomes (Standing et al., 2008). Key findings from the study indicated that parents of students attending a GEAR UP school were more likely to be involved, had more knowledge of the opportunities and benefits of postsecondary education for their children, and had higher academic expectations for their children (Standing et al., 2008). Students who attended GEAR UP schools compared to those from matched non-GEAR UP schools had more knowledge of postsecondary education opportunities and were more likely to take above-grade-level science courses. However, there was no evidence of an association between attending a GEAR UP school and the strength of student intentions to attend college, or a shift in students' behavior or grades in middle school (Standing et al., 2008).

Categorization of College Access Programs

Although federal programs enjoy a large share of the funding dedicated to college access programs, there are also institutionally based and privately funded programs that provide similar services to a wide audience of middle school and high school students. In an attempt to understand the full range of programs, researchers have conducted several surveys of college access programs, with some (administered by the U.S. Department of Education) focusing on college-sponsored elementary and secondary tutoring and college-sponsored early intervention programs (Cahalan & Farris, 1990; Chaney, Lewis, & Farris, 1995). The most comprehensive, descriptive survey of college access programs was conducted in 1999 by the College Board (National Survey of Pre-College Outreach Programs, 2001) and led to the publication of *2001 Outreach Program Handbook*. The survey identified programs serving underrepresented students and outlined their goals, services, and operational structure in order to help practitioners, researchers, and

policymakers understand the full range of programs and services offered (Swail & Perna, 2002). Shifts in student demographics and policies, and a need to understand the current landscape of pre-college outreach programs, were cited as reasons for conducting an updated survey, which led to two publications: the *2012 National Survey of Pre-College Outreach Programs* and *A Blueprint for Success: Case studies of Successful Pre-College Outreach Programs* (Swail, 2012). The companion case-study project identified common themes that had resulted in effective practices executed by 10 successful pre-college outreach programs (Swail, Quinn, Landis, & Fung, 2012).

The two surveys used similar methods, and the results revealed only minimal changes in the classification of college access programs between 2001 and 2012. Notably, the response rate for the two surveys was drastically different. The 2001 study was based on responses from 1,110 programs nationwide, compared to 374 programs in the 2012 survey. However, the 2012 report did not account for the significant deline in program responses. Both surveys were web-based and had been distributed via email; however, the 2001 survey also mailed letters to over 4,500 presidents and CEOs of colleges and universities, which may account for some of the disparity in response rates.

In both cases, college access programs were categorized by their funding source, with the largest percentage of college access programs classified as federal TRIO programs (Swail, 2012; Swail & Perna, 2002). Increased college attendance, awareness, and exposure were all primary goals of college access programs but college completion became increasingly important in the 2012 survey (Swail & Perna, 2002; Swail, 2012). Additional findings relevant to this literature review were the percentage of college access programs that operated during the summer, dropping from 15% in 2001 to 9% in

2012, and the percentage of programs that tracked students after high school graduation, which dropped from 64% in 2001 to 59% in 2012.

College Access Program Evaluations

Both the 2001 and 2012 surveys of college access programs reported high percentages of programs conducting evaluations, though the strength of those assessments has been a source of criticism. Many researchers have indicated that the evaluations lack the rigor and methodological design needed for strong empirical review (Bergin, Cooks, & Bergin, 2007; Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Laguardia, 1998; Swail & Perna, 2001). Evaluations have not been reliable and have often yielded very little useful information about the impact of college access programs (Gandara, 2001; Swail & Perna, 2001). Many programs forgo evaluations fearing that they will threaten provision of services (Gandara, 2001). In many cases, programs cannot afford to pay third-party researchers to conduct independent evaluations of their programs, resulting in a lack of longitudinal quantitative studies effectively disaggregated by student demographics (Hooker & Brand, 2009).

Even program evaluations that have highlighted positive results are often unable to pinpoint which specific components or services actually led to increases in college access (Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Swail & Perna, 2001). This is due in part to the lack of a common approach or evaluation schema (Swail & Perna, 2002). Gullatt and Jan (2003) summarized the concern this way:

> The survey results point out that a lack of internal, rigorous evaluation in these programs limits their ability to serve more students effectively, to make authentic and lasting links with the schools their participants attend, and to impact more

significantly federal, state and local policy regarding educational opportunity. (p. 2)

Review of College Access Program Effectiveness

Although there is little agreement around which specific components of a college access program are most effective at increasing postsecondary opportunities for disadvantaged students and how best to measure the actual impact, there is broad acceptance that outreach efforts that increase students' aspirations and improve their academic preparation are instrumental in providing disadvantaged students more opportunities to pursue higher education (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). Gullatt and Jan's (2003) review included a survey of six major reports to determine the principle practices of college access programs. The principle practices were used to evaluate four exemplary programs: Baltimore College Bound, Career Beginnings, Sponsor a Scholar, and Upward Bound. Since 2003, three additional studies have scrutinized a broad range of college access programs to understand which programmatic elements make them most effective (Domina, 2009; Hooker & Brand, 2009; Swail et al., 2012). A review of these studies advances the conversation about effective college access programs.

Hooker and Brand (2009) examined the evaluations of 23 programs that promoted college and career readiness, and used selected evaluation results to create a logic model that helps explain what experiences and processes allow youth to build the knowledge and skills needed to establish their own pathways to success. For a program to be included in the study, it needed to conduct comparative, external or third-party evaluations and research designs that included a control and comparison group. Of the 23 programs evaluated, 10 focused on high school-aged students and three were offered

at the postsecondary level. In most cases the program evaluation relied on test scores, credits accrued, and graduation rates, and reported quantitative results.

A number of themes emerged from Hooker and Brand's (2009) review, ultimately leading to the identification of 10 elements of success within two broad categories: (1) programmatic elements of success and (2) structural and system-focused elements of success. The most common elements appearing across the 23 college access programs that were evaluated included rigor and academic support, relationships and partnerships, and cross-systems collaboration.

Gullatt and Jan (2003) concluded that obtaining early information and engaging in constructive learning activities were essential to helping disadvantaged students increase their postsecondary education opportunities. However, little was revealed about how best to engage families and which curricular approaches were the most effective. A review of pre-college outreach programs by Oesterreich (2000) highlighted a need for early intervention and for greater awareness of the cultural norms of the communities within which the programs work.

The general focus of college access programs has been on impacting the college enrollment rates of underrepresented students. By increasing aspirations and academic performance, college access programs attempt to create a college-going culture to ensure that underrepresented students have the same opportunities as other high school populations. The dialog, however, has focused less frequently on the role, if any, college access programs have in shaping the type of institution a student attends. Similar to college access programs, community colleges disproportionately serve first-generation and low-income students, requiring them to transfer from a two-year to a four-year

college in order to receive their bachelor's degree. The impact the community college sector and transfer pathways have on first-generation and low-income students warrant their own review.

Community College and Transfer Pathways

The role community colleges play in higher education has grown increasingly important as their enrollment numbers have expanded. In 1965, enrollment in community colleges was 1.2 million, then increased dramatically to 5.5 million just 30 years later (Coley, 2000). As enrollment in community colleges has increased, so has the need to define their missions as gatekeepers or gateways (Dowd, 2007) and to understand if they are responsible for "cooling out" (Clark, 1960) or "heating up" (Zwerling, 1976) students' educational aspirations.

Community colleges provide the curriculum for students to begin their college experience and complete the first two years of a baccalaureate degree, but they also serve a large population of students who are looking for technical or career education, developmental education, and English language training. The totality of programs and services offered by community colleage are generally considered even broader, falling into five major categories or classifications (Vaughan, 2006): college transfer, occupational/technical, developmental education, community services, and support services. Cooley (2000) estimated that 10% of community college entrants planned to earn a certificate or less, 12% had the goal of an associate degree, and 80% aspired to a bachelor's degree or higher. Recent studies have reported similar breakdowns in certificate, associate, and degree-seeking estimates at community colleges (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinback, 2005; Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). These findings provide strong

evidence that the mission of community colleges may have diversified over the past century, but the greatest proportion of students entering community colleges do so with the intention of earning a bachelor's degree and, as a result, need to transfer to a four-year college to complete their degree. The current study focused on the largest cross-section of students—those who began at a community college with the intention of transferring to a four-year institution—and refers to that process here as the transfer pathway.

In addition to providing a broad range of programs and services, community colleges also serve a diverse population of students. Historically, the open enrollment and low costs of community colleges have offered access to economically and academically disadvantaged students, fulfilling a democratizing mission (Alfonso, 2006). Compared to four-year institutions, community colleges enroll a large share of students over 24 years of age and enroll more diverse students, with high percentages of Black and Hispanic students (Cooley, 2000).

Of particular importance to my study was the increasing percentage of FGLI students enrolled at community colleges. Although pre-collegiate academic preparation has increased across all socioeconomic levels—paving the way for more students to enroll in higher education—attendance at two-year colleges from 1972 to 2004 more than doubled for students with the lowest socioeconomic status (Bastedo &. Jaquette, 2011). Even when grade point average and SAT scores were controlled for in their study, Astin and Oseguera (2004) found that a growing number of low-income students were attending less selective institutions, including community colleges, over the past 25 years. Students who are the first in their families to attend college are disproportionately

enrolled in community colleges and are estimated to make up 38% of the two-year public college population (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

The growing population of students attending community colleges, especially those who have historically been underrepresented in higher education, makes this sector increasingly important. Yet, as Coley (2000) alluded to in his review of community colleges as they turned 100, determining whether these complex institutions are a success or failure is not easy. The effectiveness of community colleges has been studied extensively, and increased criticism has been directed at community colleges for their low degree completion and transfer rates. The disparity in bachelor's degree completion rates can be traced back to the 1980s, when the transfer rates dropped to 28%, a 29% decline from the previous decade alone (Anderson, Sun, & Alfonso, 2006).

Despite findings that most students enter a community college with the intention of earning a bachelor's degree, study after study has reported lower bachelor's degree completion rates compared to similar students who began at a four-year institution. Studies that have controlled for selection variations by accounting for demographic and academic preparation differences have still found discrepancies in completion rates. Alfonso (2006) found that community college starters were 30% less likely to complete a bachelor's degree; Reynolds and DesJardins (2009) reported a 21.6% difference; and Stephan, Rosenbaum, and Person (2009) reported a 23% difference. Monaghan and Attewell (2015) review of community college entrants' route to a bachelor's degree found only one study that did not show a statistical difference in the completion rates of students who began at a community college compared to those who began at a four-year institution.

These low transfer and bachelor degree completion rates have caused many to question whether community colleges have realized their missions or instead diverted students from transfer pathway programs toward certificate and vocational programs (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Although many factors have contributed to these rate declines, an examination of the academic preparation of students entering community colleges and the challenges associated with transferring, including loss of transfer credit and transfer shock, is instructive, providing an important vantage on the current landscape.

Academic Preparation

Two important factors to consider when evaluating the effectiveness of transfer pathways are the academic preparation of students entering a two-year college and their ability to be academically successful after transferring to a four-year college. Academic preparation is typically measured through high school grades and course completion, test scores as well as completion of specific courses like high-level math courses (Perna, 2005). Adelman (1999, 2006) stated that the academic intensity of a student's high school curriculum, and specifically the completion of math beyond Algebra II, is the greatest factor in predicting baccalaureate degree completion. It is no surprise, then, that the students who are less likely to enroll in college are also the students who are less academically prepared.

Community colleges offer open access, and as a result students enter with a broad range of academic ability. One study of community college students estimated that 61% of students took at least one developmental education course, while 25% took two (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Although it is beyond the scope of the current study to fully detail the history, role, and impact of developmental education, it is important to understand

key issues and how developmental education impacts the progress and ultimately the transfer pathway for students.

Developmental education, typically in the form of courses in math, English, and English as a second language, has been studied extensively, and its impact on student progression has been contested. Parker, Barrett, and Bustillos' (2014) examination of developmental education traced the debate over the effectiveness and role of developmental education in higher education back to the colonial colleges—and similar arguments in support or opposition of such programs are still being made today. For every study and researcher suggesting that developmental courses allow unprepared students to gain the skills necessary to succeed in college (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Lazarick, 1997) there another study and set of researchers who have determined that the benefits of remediation are not fully understood (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Calcagno & Long, 2008). Goldrick-Rab (2010) contended that it is difficult to determine if developmental education is actually a deterrent or if the results are related to the observable and unobservable differences between students who take developmental education courses and those who do not. Goldrick-Rab spoke to the complexity of studying developmental education, Melguizo, Bos, and Prather (2011) evaluated further in their review of the relevant literature. Specifically, they provided a review of developmental math education studies and categorized them according to the type of evaluation technique used, including descriptive, quasi-experimental, and experimental designs. Their review of each design and of studies utilizing different methods ultimately led them to conclude that "the current evidence on the state of basic skills math in the

United States is contradictory and mixed at best" (Melguzio, Bos, & Prather, 2011, p. 180).

Although the debate over the effectiveness of developmental education continues, there is general agreement that community college entrants are more likely to be enrolled in developmental courses regardless of their academic preparation. Adelman (2006) determined that students with the same academic ability as those attending a four-year institution were more likely to be enrolled in developmental education courses when enrolled at a two-year college. Monaghan and Attewell (2015) also found a greater likelihood that students would be enrolled in developmental education courses if they attended a community college, even when they compared students with similar high school GPAs and standardized test scores. Despite these findings, more and more states, including New York, Tennessee, and Massachusetts, have made concerted efforts to hold community colleges solely responsible for providing developmental education, and in some cases have mandated that four-year public institutions stop offering this level of education. Not surprisingly, this has drawn criticism from supporters of developmental education who see the segregation of remediation courses to the community college as an attempt to deny access to four-year colleges and, ultimately, bachelor's degrees for a large portion of students (Attewell et al., 2006).

Many have attributed the low transfer and degree attainment rates of community college students to their lack of academic preparation and their need for developmental education. Research on college readiness has highlighted the importance of completing a curriculum that includes advanced-level courses (Adelman, 2006), and many economically and disadvantaged student populations lack a college preparatory

experience in high school, leading practitioners to blame the students for not being academically prepared. However, many studies holding academic qualification constant have found that academic preparation alone does not explain the discrepancy in bachelor's degree attainment (Roksa & Calcagno, 2010). In Alfonso's (2006) study, which controlled for socioeconomic and academic preparation differences, she found that a lack of connection to the campus, low expectations by the faculty, and limited transferability of credits all contributed to a decline in bachelor's degree attainment. It is necessary, therefore, to investigate policies that may affect capacity as well as structural barriers preventing student success in community colleges.

Transfer Shock

In order for transfer students to obtain a bachelor's degree, they must leave the institution where they began their studies, immediately creating structural issues. In their study of academic and social integration, Townsend and Wilson (2008) likened this phenomenon to experiencing two "first years" and described this a transfer shock. If community college students are ultimately going to receive a bachelor's degree, they must break away from a culture they have become acclimated to and assimilate to the prevailing institutional culture of the four-year institution which ge (Townsend & Wilson, 2008). Students attending four-year institutions often become socially integrated into the campus through participation in student activities, clubs, and organizations. Townsend and Wilson's (2008) qualitative study found that transfer students did not have the advantage of the first two years to form social bonds; instead, their integration was predominately academically oriented.

The impact that transfer shock has on a student's performance once enrolled at a four-year college has been evaluated from several different angles. Cejda, Kaylor, and Rewey (1998) conducted a critical examination of studies of heterogeneous students and concluded that there was a reduction in transfer students' GPAs during their first semester at a four-year college. Instead, Cejda et al. advocated for focusing on the cumulative GPA of incoming transfer students, the number of credits completed before transferring, and patterns within academic programs before determining if transfer shock exists (Cejda et al., 1998). Their findings revealed that the drop in transfer students' GPAs was not statistically significant across all disciplines, but when evaluated by program, the GPA decline during the first semester for students pursuing a math or science major was significant. In a longitudinal study of over 7,000 native and transfer students, Ishitani (2008) identified variations in persistence based on class standing and GPA. Transfer students who arrived at a four-year institution with freshman standing were 16% more likely to depart over the following three-year period than native students, whereas sophomore and junior transfers persisted at a higher level than native students (Ishitani, 2008). Both studies provided evidence that transfer shock, as it relates to academic performance at four-year institutions, is experienced differently based on the number of credits a transfer student has accumulated, his or her GPA at the sending institution, and the academic major he or she pursues.

Transfer Credit Loss

The shock that transfer students experience often occurs long before they begin classes at a four-year institution and is often the result of transfer credit loss during the enrollment process. A study by Monaghan and Atwell (2015) compared demographically

and academically similar students at community colleges and non-selective four-year colleges, and found that credit loss accounted for a large portion of the gap in bachelor's degree completion. Although the degree of credit loss varied, 28% of transfer students in their study lost between 10% and 89% of the non-developmental education college credits they had taken at a community college (Monaghan & Atwell, 2015). Students who had received all or nearly all of their college credits in transfer were 2.5 times more likely to complete a bachelor's degree, and Monahan and Atwell (2014) concluded that the overall bachelor's degree completion rates of transfer students would increase if transfer students received credit for all of the courses they took at a community college. Other qualitative studies have confirmed the impact transfer credit loss has on individual students. Flaga (2006) conducted a qualitative study of 35 transfer students who expressed confusion around transfer credit policies and who realized that their time to completion would be lengthened due to additional major requirements or lack of transferability of courses. In Townsend and Wilson's (2009) exploratory study of 19 transfer students, participants shared their concerns about the lack of information transfer advisors were able to provide regarding transfer credit, but they also expressed optimism about how articulation agreements had helped ease the transfer process.

Articulation Agreements

Evidence around the importance of increasing the transfer and degree completion rates of students who begin at a community college, and around the role transfer credits play in that process, has led to a more intensive focus on articulation agreements. Originally designed to facilitate the movement of students between aligned institutional programs, articulation agreements have now expanded to include statewide initiatives.

Statewide articulation programs increased from 12 participating states in 1990 to 25 by 2000 (Anderson et al., 2006). However, one study showed that transfer rates did not increase as a result of articulation agreements when a student's demographic, socioeconomic status, and enrollment characteristics were held constant (Anderson et al., 2006). Additional statewide transfer policies have been proposed to help improve the percentage of students transferring from two-year to four-year institutions, but the impact these policies have on underserved student populations is not fully understood.

An increase in articulation agreements and the creation of statewide transfer policies highlight a few of the efforts underway to help community college students make a more seamless transfer to four-year institutions. The history and mission of the community college sector, as well as the success students have experienced within it, are critical to higher education in general because of the growth it has experienced over the last few decades, but particularly salient for this study because it is the most widely attended institutional type for FGLI students. This chapter explored how students make college choices as seen through the lens of human-capital and sociological models, and also revealed a host of additional factors that impact the decision-making process, including structural barriers and the availability of resources. College access programs attempt to minimize the barriers that underrepresented students experience in selecting and enrolling in a college, but the impacts of such services are not fully understood. Community colleges also serve this population by providing developmental education, practical training, or pathways to a four-year degree but have also been criticized for diverting students' ambitions. Perna (2006) advocated for the use of combined models that help scholars and practitioners understand how students make college choice

decisions and access valuable information, and she incorporates both into her own conceptual model of college choice. This model acknowledges the differences that exist in the resources students have by imbedding the decision-making process within multiple contextual layers, while also highlighting intermediate outcomes, and therefore provided a useful framework for my study (Perna, 2006).

Conceptual Framework

Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice, combined with Stanton-Salazar's (1997) framework of social capital and institutional support, comprised the conceptual lens for the current study. The conceptual model of college choice draws on human capital investment models (i.e., econometric models) as well as sociological models to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to the college decision-making process. Whereas human capital investment models provide a framework for how decisions are made, they do not explain how information can vary among diverse groups during the decision-making process. Sociological models help explain the ways in which the amount and type of information one has access to can vary across race, ethnicity, class, and gender, but they do not explain how decisions are ultimately made (Manski, 1993). Many researchers have advocated for the use of combined college choice models that recognize variations across different groups regarding access to information and that how decisions are made; otherwise, they argue, disparities in college choice will remain.

Figure 1 depicts Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice. It places human capital models of college choice at the center of the framework but recognizes that decision making varies by individual and considers these factors within and across four

contextual layers. The first layer is categorized as habitus and considers the impact an individual's demographic characteristics can have on decision making as well as the role social and cultural capital plays. The other three contextual layers consider external factors that impact a student's decision-making process, including the school and community (layer 2), higher education (layer 3), and social, economic, and policy impacts (layer 4) (Perna, 2006). Perna (2006) believed that a model that draws on both human capital and sociological approaches, and that considers the involvement of multiple stakeholders, provides a more comprehensive understanding of student college choice across groups.

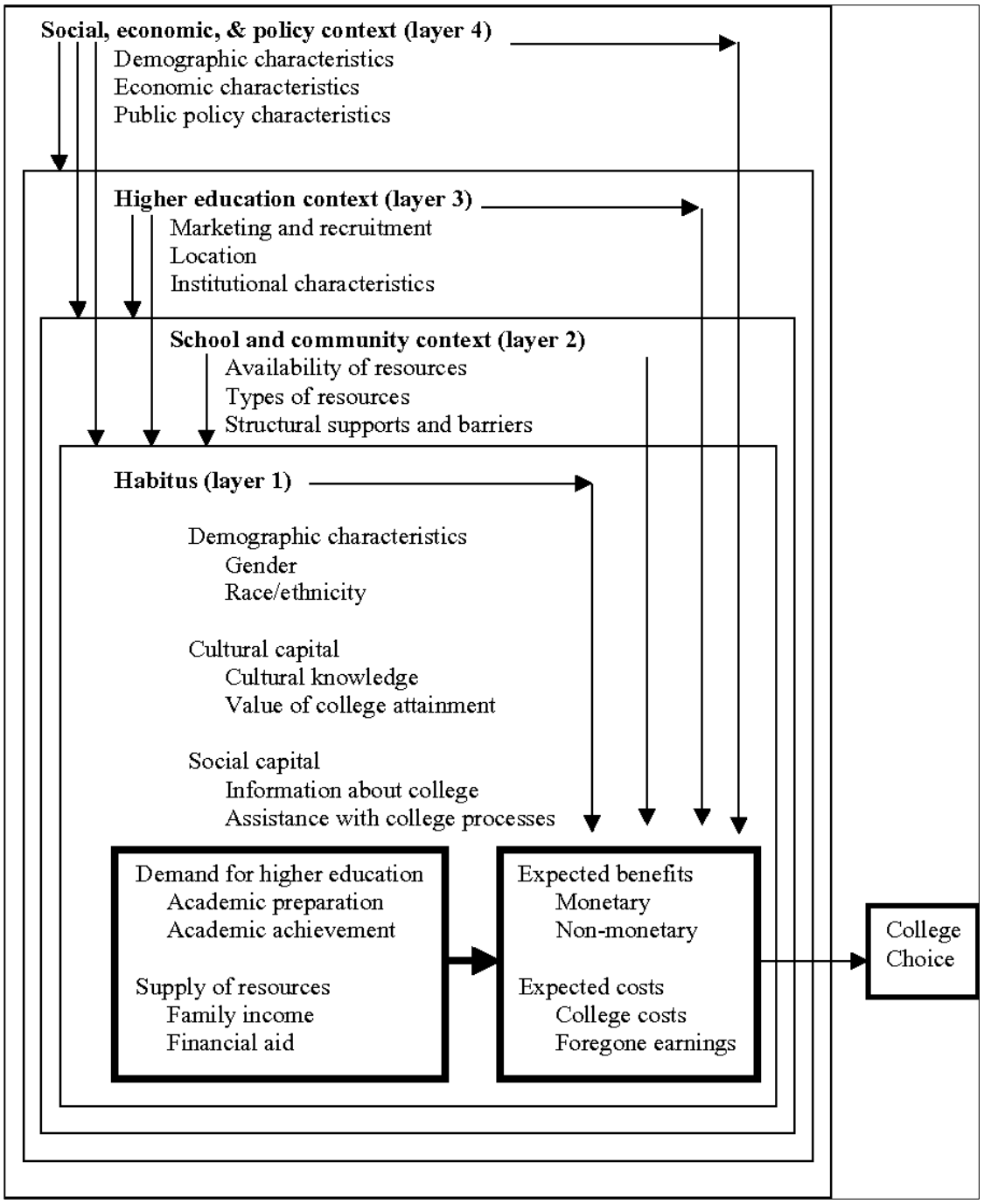

Figure 1. Conceptual model of student college choice.

Adapted from Perna, L. W. (2006). Studying college access and choice: A Proposed conceptual model. In J. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research*, vol. xxi (pp. 99–157). Netherlands: Springer.")

Although Perna's (2006) model was develolped originally to explain how college choice decisions are made, it also provides opportunities to understand outcomes; with the inclusion of Stanton-Salazar's (1997) framework of social capital and institutional support, the model could be adapted to understand the first-year experiences of college students. The relationships that students develop and maintain, interpreted as social capital, are central to students' performance and experience, and are nested within several contextual layers of the model.

To accurately reflect the movement of the students in this study toward postsecondary education and to explain more specifically how the relationships they developed prior to and during college impacted both their college choices and experiences, this study altered Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice to include Stanton-Salazar's (1997) research on institutional agents. As defined by Stanton-Salazar (1997), *institutional agents* include "those individuals who have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities" (p. 6). Institutional agents within schools often function as conduits for reproducing race and class inequalities that may exist within the environment; however, they also provide opportunities for students of color to overcome social structural barriers and foster social mobility (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Stanton-Salazar (2011) advocated for conceptual models that consider how the educational attainment of students of color is impacted by socialization and network relationships, and for the design of interventions and school environments that can shift power dynamics.

Figure 2 depicts the revised conceptual model used in this study which maintains Perna's (2006) four contextual layers and includes institutional agents in layer 1. Each layer in the model can be used to understand how the decision-making process and experience may differ for individual students. Economic conditions and public policy (layer 4) play a significant role in the broader postsecondary environment and may impact the number of students considering college, their access to financial aid, and the degree to which they are prepared, based on secondary education alignment. The higher education context (layer 3) considers the impact varying institutional types can have on college choice and experience, and helps account for changes and shifts in admissions standards, recruitment tactics, and institutional priorities. The school and community context (layer 2), relates to the resources available within the school setting, including the access students have to staff, teachers, and peers who can either create barriers or provide access. Habitus (layer 1), which was altered for this study's conceptual framework, recognizes the degree to which social and cultural capital, as well as institutional agency, can influence college choice and experience. Stanton-Salazar (2011) defined the support provided by institutional agents according to 14 different roles divided into four categories: direct support, integrative support, system developer, and system linkage and networking support.

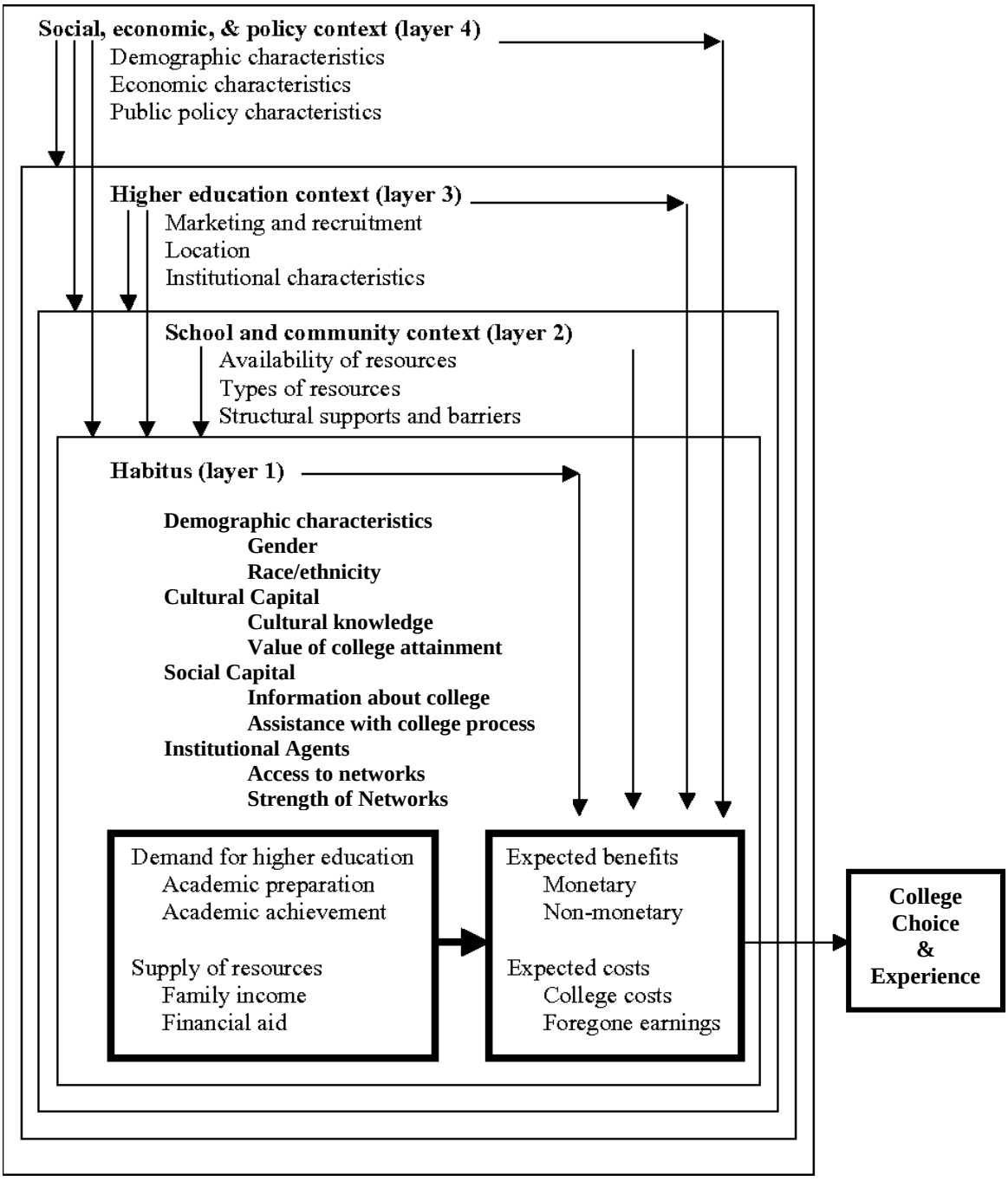

Figure 2. Revised conceptual model of student college choice and experience.

Social Capital Theory

Although social capital has been used extensively in higher education research, clear distinctions between social capital and cultural capital have not always been made; in fact, researchers have often used the terms interchangeably. Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice includes both concepts in the first layer, acknowledging that they are different and that each play a role in college choice decisions. This study utilized social capital theory to explain the experience of first-generation and low-income students, and also drew a clear distinction between social and cultural capital. Whereas social capital focuses on the relationships that exist beyond the family, referred to as networks, cultural capital focuses more on information and experiences gained within the community, most often between family members. Lamont and Lareau (1988) analyzed the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1964, 1979) and defined *cultural capital* as "widely shared, legitimate culture made up of high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, behaviors, and goods) used in direct or indirect social and cultural exclusion" (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 164). The two forms of capital often coexist, one leading to the creation of the other; however, social capital centers on the strength and exchange of information in networks and relationships, and for this reason served as the theoretical basis for this study.

As FGLI students enter higher education, they are required to negotiate a new environment. The relationships they build with faculty, administrators, and peers can provide valuable information that makes adjusting to the new environment more successful. Social capital theory offers a context for understanding how these networks are created, including the challenges underserved populations may experience in forming

them. More specifically, in this study, social capital theory was used as a framework for analyzing how different paths—that is, college access programs and community colleges—contributed to the creation of networks and relationships for FGLI students.

Social capital is not a new concept, and sociologists have long understood that involvement in and with groups can have individual benefits. The use of social capital has been widespread and applied to so many events and contexts that, according to Portes (2000), the concept has lost distinct meaning. Nevertheless, many higher education researchers have used social capital theory to explain how college choice decisions are made and how social capital can increase access to other forms of capital (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Perna & Titus, 2005).

The basic notions of capital date back to the works of Marx (1906), who described how a commodity is created, circulated in the marketplace, then exchanged for money, or capital. More contemporary scholars have concentrated on neo-capital, focusing less on Marx's class-based perspective and more on actor-based perspectives that include individuals and groups investing and accruing resources (Lin, 2000). Capital can be understood as both a concept and a theory; Lin (2008) maintained that it represents investments in certain types of resources of value and, as a theory, "describes the process by which capital is captured and reproduced for returns" (p. 3). Various forms of capital exist, including economic, human, and cultural, each possessing a different degree of tangibility and fungibility. Social capital is much less tangible but can play a critical role in accessing other forms of capital that are easier to measure and exchange, making them far more fungible.

Bourdieu (1985) was the first to provide an analysis of social capital, which he defines as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group" (p. 248). The creation of networks is an endless process and the ability to connect with networks provides access to other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1985). The degree of social capital an individual possess depends on both the type of relationships an individual has as well as the amount and quality of those relationships (Portes, 2000). Coleman (1988) stated that social capital is not a single entity but rather multiple entities that share some aspect of social structure and can facilitate certain actions of actors within the structure. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and Coleman's work on rational action, Stanton-Salazar (1997) described social capital as "relationships with institutional agents, and networks that weave these relationships into units" (p. 8). Stanton-Salazar (1997) described the benefits of building these socialized networks in facilitating opportunities but also recognized that the creation of such ties can be problematic for certain populations based on class, race, and gender. Although earlier scholars have provided varying definitions of social capital, Portes (2000) saw a growing consensus around the definition of social capital as "the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures" (p. 6).

Several studies have utilized social capital theory to examine the resources students access during the college choice process. In a study of 20 Chicana students at one urban high school, Ceja (2006) used social capital theory to help understand the role parents and siblings played in the college search and selection process. His findings

indicated that although the Chicano parents supported their sons' and daughters' educational objectives, their lack of experience and familiarity with higher education hampered their ability to provide specific guidance. In many cases, older siblings provided the information and, ultimately, the social capital that the Chicano students needed to enroll in college. Stanton-Salazar's (1997) research looked at the challenges low-status students have in building relationships beyond the immediate family, which he termed institutional agents. In his study of 205 Mexican-origin students, he determined that those with greater expectations and grades had greater social capital ties (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). His findings also suggested that Mexican-origin students had difficulty formulating relationships with school officials, and when they did establish such connections, their ties were restricted to a very small number of school personnel.

The revised conceptual framework served as my guide for studying underserved students who selected alternative pathways and attended different sectors of higher education. It also helped explain how institutional relationships were created in a college access program and at a community college, and how those relationships manifested over the course of study participants' first year in college.

Summary

Research has shown that FGLI students have access to fewer resources, which impacts the amount of college information they are able to gather and ultimately the type of institutions they attend (Perna, 2006). Factors pertaining to cost and academic preparation, as well as a lack of accurate information, all contribute to the college decisions FGLI students make and ultimately contribute to their disproportional enrollment in community colleges. Although community colleges aim to provide access

to higher education and a transfer pathway to four-year institutions, their success doing so have been mixed, and they are often criticized for diverting student's educational goals away from a bachelor's degree.

Similar to community colleges, which serve a large number of FGLI students, college access programs were designed to help underserved populations gain access to college by increasing their academic qualifications and providing them with additional support. However, their influence on college choice is not fully understood, and their effectiveness is often not measured or the evaluations of these programs are inconclusive. A student's decision to participate in a college access program may alter his or her college choice decision, the type of institution her or she attends, and how prepared he or she is for higher education.

Summer college access programs that provide conditional acceptance into a four-year college and community colleges both represent valuable access points for FGLI students entering higher education. Understanding the factors FGLI students consider when comparing these two options and who provides support in the decision-making process is important to investigate. Additionally, research that connects how college choice decisions shape the college experience is particularly relevant to FGLI students since their enrollment patterns and completion rates differ compared to more advantaged peers who have a higher socioeconomic status and parents with prior college experience.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The focus of my study was to understand the decision-making process and first-year experience of FGLI students who had selected different pathways in pursuit of a baccalaureate degree. This chapter opens with an overview of the methodology and research design selected for the study including, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. Also included in this chapter is a description of my role in conducting the research and how my worldview impacted the research approach. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical considerations that needed to be taken when pursing this qualitative research.

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experience of two groups—students who participated in a college access program and those who attended a community college. Using a qualitative method, I explored multiple sources of data, used an emergent design, and acknowledged my role as the researcher in the study, all with the goal of gaining a broader understanding of individuals or groups (Creswell, 2014). Another advantage of using qualitative research and a key factor in selecting a phenomenological approach (discussed in the next section) was the ability to examine participants in their natural setting and to make sense of phenomena in terms of the

meaning participants brought to it without imposing preexisting expectations (Mertens, 2014).

Phenomenological Research

I selected a phenomenological research design for this study. Generally, phenomenological research attempts to understand the totality of common or lived experiences of the study participants as they occur (Giorgi, 1997). The focus of such research is not only on what a group has experienced but how they have experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological approach is recommended when it a researcher wishes to examine the individual or shared experiences around phenomena; by understanding these common experiences, it is easier to develop practices or policies and foster a richer understanding of the features of the phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Central to phenomenology is the recognition that humans cannot be separated from their experiences. Phenomenologists are concerned less about the decisions humans make and more about how decisions are made (Vagle, 2014). In this respect, phenomenologists focus not on providing scientific explanations for how things work but on how things "manifest and appear in and through our being in the world" (Vagle, 2014, p. 22).

Phenomenology is both a philosophical movement as well as a method. It was explored in the works of Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Hegel, and Ernst Mach, though Edmund Husserl is often credited with introducing phenomenology as a departure from metaphysical speculation and a way to encourage contact with concrete living experiences (Moran, 2000). Giorgi (1997) argued that the philosophical method of phenomenology must be addressed before it can be applied to human science, including understanding phenomenological reduction, description, and essence. Phenomenological

reduction challenges individuals to not take the observance of experiences for granted as they do not simply occur and must be examined in order to be understood (Giorgi, 1997). From a philosophical standpoint, "no work can be considered to be phenomenological if some sense of the reduction is not articulated and utilized" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 240). Description helps provide a rich account of the phenomenon being studied by giving "linguistic expression to the object of any given act precisely as it appears within that act (p. 241). From descriptions come universal and foundational essences. Husserl (as cited in Giorgi, 1997) described essence as a durable statement that articulates the fundamental meaning of a phenomenon.

Husserl (as cited in Moran, 2000) believed that phenomenological practice "required a radical shift in viewpoint, suspension or bracketing of the everyday natural attitude" (p. 2). Husserl's followers questioned both the value and the possibility of reduction, showing at an early stage the varying perspectives philosophers had on phenomenology (Moran, 2000). Vagle (2014) reinforced this point when he referred to phenomenology in the plural, serving different purposes, not a singular philosophy or methodology. This highlights the need for the researcher to remain true to the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology while recognizing that modifications may need to be made in respect to the scientific use of it as a methodology (Giorgi, 1997).

To understand phenomenological research, one must also grasp notions of consciousness, intentionality, objects, and subjects, and how these terms relate to each other. Consciousness cannot be overlooked in a phenomenological approach because even if ignored it makes its presence known (Giorgi, 1997). Consciousness gets to the

essence of phenomenology; Giorgi (1997) defined it as "the awareness of the system, 'embodied-self-world-others' all of which are intuitable, that is presentable; and precisely as they are presented, without addition or deletion" (p. 238). Dowling (2007) described consciousness as experiences one understands before one has thought about them, or "applied ways of understanding or explaining" (p. 132). Intentionality is the key feature of consciousness, and as Moustakas (1994) stated, individuals are always intentionally conscious of something. Vagle (2014) recommended disregarding the traditional definition of intention—that is, an action one wishes to take—and instead embracing intentionality as being meaningfully connected to something. Consciousness also relates to objects, which cannot be divided, and Giorgi (1997) believed that objects and subjects do not exist independently; rather, each implies a relationship with the other, and that relationship must be understood structurally and holistically. Phenomenology marks a shift in understanding subjects and objects, and its focus of inquiry is the relationship between the two (Vagle, 2014).

Approaches to phenomenology. Phenomenological research is often divided into two categories—hermeneutic and transcendental—related to the researcher's goal of providing either deep descriptions of the phenomenon or interpretation. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on lived experience and on interpretations that center on historical meanings and how those meanings operate at the individual and social levels. In a transcendental approach, the researcher is committed to descriptions of experiences, not just explanations, and seeks meaning from appearances. Another defining characteristic of transcendental phenomenological research that distinguishes it from hermeneutic phenomenology, is the role the researcher plays in the study. The

transcendental phenomenological researcher is generally bracketed from the research, also referred to as epoche, in an attempt to suspend judgement until what is real is discovered in more certain terms. Bracketing, a form of phenomenological reduction, is an ongoing process and requires the researcher to focus on specific situations and set aside biases and prejudgments in hopes of seeing the person or situation being studied in a new light. Biases and prejudgments cannot be set aside until they have been explored and understood, a process Moustakas (1994) called reflective meditation. During this process, the researcher is encouraged to consciously acknowledge prejudgments, label them, review the list, and then attempt to "release" them until an internal sense of closure has been reached (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing does not result in a researcher removing himself or herself from a study; instead, the researcher identifies the personal experiences he or she has with the phenomenon and then attempts to set them aside (Giorgi, 1997). This allows the phenomenon to be understood with fewer biases and with less judgement. Moustakas (1994) stated that by looking at something before judging, individuals can actually see what is before them and enhance their openness. Whether bracketing is completely possible has been questioned, but there is value nevertheless in the effort to remove prejudices; thus, bracketing aids in the search for discoveries and knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

Recently, scholars and practitioners of phenomenology have moved away from bracketing toward a focus on phenomenological reduction using a forward-thinking approach. Drawing on the work of Dahlberg (2006, as cited in Vagle, 2012), Vagle (2012) adopted the term bridling. Like bracketing, bridling acknowledges pre-understandings but focuses on comprehending the multiplicity of experiences and on

patiently waiting for the phenomenon to present itself. This creates an openness or recognition that phenomena are not as they first appear, and the observer must remain patient in order to see new things and be reflective throughout the process (Vagle, 2012). Bridling focuses less on removing previous biases and more on slowing down the process of understanding, refraining from making definitive statements and creating enough distance that the researcher is able to see the phenomenon more clearly (Vagle, 2012).

A final distinguishing feature of transcendental phenomenology is the formation of both textural and structural descriptions during the data analysis phase of the research. After the data have been themed and significant statements have been combined, the researcher creates a textural description of what the participant experienced. Following a similar procedure, a structural description is also created that describes the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The combination of both descriptions makes up the essence of the experience. The application of these types of description will be explored further in the data analysis section.

New approaches to phenomenology have drawn on the principles of hermeneutic and transcendental phenomenology but have attempted to go even further to draw distinctions. Vagle (2014) provided a framework for post-intentional phenomenology, which questions the subject-object relationship. At the core of post-intentional phenomenology is the recognition that subjects are not connected to the world in clear, stable, or consistent ways (Vagle, 2014). This approach recognizes multiple voices and acknowledges that "post-structural commitments to knowledge always already [are] tentative and never complete" (p. 121).

Qualitative researchers have criticized traditional phenomenological approaches that attempt to explain one universal truth or essence. Vagle (2014) believed essence has been misunderstood by many researchers and was never intended to be an essential core, definitive or final statement. Instead of debating essence and its value, Vagle (2014) moved away from central meaning and reimagined essence as tentative manifestations in order to account for context and situations and to appreciate its multiple and partial nature. Transcendental phenomenology goes the furthest in its search for essence, looking for essential structures or constant identity (Giorgi, 1997), whereas hermeneutic phenomenology allows for multiple meanings, and post-intentional phenomenology believes in endless partial meanings (Vagle, 2014).

In this study, I drew on the early tenets of transcendental phenomenology but also incorporated post-intentional phenomenology methods, therefore approaching phenomenological reduction and the creation of essence statements cautiously. Phenomenological reduction encourages the researcher to understand his or her personal or previous experiences and to pause during the data gathering phase in order to understand what may not be immediately apparent. Due to the contested nature of bracketing and its inherent focus on the past, I drew on recent phenomenological reduction approaches, including bridling. As another departure from transcendental phenomenology, essence statements were not developed due to their temporary meaning and in an effort to allow the participants' individual voices to be heard.

Site Selection

The two institutions selected for this study both offered a six-week conditional acceptance summer college-access program, were similarly sized, and served a large

percentage of underrepresented students, including high percentages of FGLI students. The University of Massachusetts Boston (UMass Boston), located in Boston, MA, enrolled approximately 12,700 undergraduate students as of 2017 and had a total student population of 16,400. It is part of the UMass system and is classified as a research university by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. The institution serves a high percentage of students of color, representing 48% of the total population and 55% of its undergraduate student population. Data from the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) freshman survey indicated that 50% of first-year UMass Boston students identified as first-generation. The 2015 NSSE survey yielded responses from 235 students, of whom 53% indicated that they were the first in their family to pursue a bachelor's degree. In addition, IPEDS data indicated that in 2015 43% of first-time, full-time undergraduate degree-seeking students received a Pell grant, which is federal funding targeted to the most financially needy students. UMass Boston is currently a commuter campus and will open its first residency hall, with 1,045 beds, in the fall of 2018.

Rowan University is located in Glassboro, NJ, 20 minutes southeast of Philadelphia, PA, and is a Master's level institution according to the Carnegie Classification system. Rowan is ranked 19th among northern regional universities according to the *U.S. News and World Report* and the *Princeton Review's* "Best in the Northeast." The campus currently has a total student enrollment of 18,000, of which 13,000 are undergraduate students. As of 2017 the student population was 28% students of color, with the largest representation being Black and Hispanic students. According to

IPEDS data, 28% of Rowan's undergraduate student population received a Pell grant in 2017. Rowan's expansion and commitment to seamless transfer is exemplified by its recent partnership with two, two-year colleges: Burlington County College (now Rowan College at Burlington County) and Gloucester County College (now Rowan College at Gloucester County). Rowan is predominantly a residential campus, with almost 80% of freshmen and sophomores residing on campus; an updated housing master plan written in 2016 aims to provide quality and affordable housing options.

Both institutions offer a six-week summer college-access program that conditionally accepts students who would otherwise not have met the institutions' admissions criteria. The Pre-College Institute (PCI) program at Rowan University is a residential program that provides access, preparation, orientation, and academic support programming. PCI is required for students in both the Education Opportunity Fund (EOF) program and the Maximizing Academic Potential (MAP) program, with the difference being that EOF students must be New Jersey residents and meet particular financial guidelines, while MAP allows Rowan to support diverse students who are not from New Jersey. The Directions for Student Potential (DSP) program at UMass Boston is a six-week, non-residential program that builds students' writing and math skills and acclimates them to the college environment.

Participant Selection

This study focused on the decision-making process and lived experiences of two different groups of students and therefore adopted a purposeful sampling approach. Purposeful sampling informs the understanding of a research problem or central phenomenon and considers the setting, actors, events or process (Creswell, 2013). As a

result, purposeful sampling draws on information-rich cases that can provide great insight into the central topic and relies on key individuals to identify cases (Suri, 2011).

Participants in my study were required to meet one of two predetermined criteria: They needed to be either first-generation college students or categorized as low-income. To be considered first-generation, the participant's parents could not have any experience in higher education. Low-income status was measured through the participant's qualification for a Pell grant. Participants also needed to have applied to a four-year institution, namely UMass Boston or Rowan University (the study sites), and been referred to its summer college-access program as a condition of their admission.

To identify qualified participants, administrators at UMass Boston and Rowan University provided two lists: one of students who had completed the summer college-access program and enrolled at the institution, and another of students who had been invited to participate in the program but did not. The list of participants who did not complete the summer program was cross-referenced with the National Student Clearinghouse to help identify students who had enrolled in a community college instead. To qualify for the study, students must have enrolled in college in the fall of 2016 and completed at least one semester. In addition to direct outreach by phone and email, administrators at UMass Boston and Rowan University helped identify potential candidates for this study.

Another critical consideration in research design is sample size. Although many researchers provide guidelines for the appropriate number of participants in a study, the general consensus is that there is no specific number of participants needed in a phenomenological study. For instance, Polkinghorne (1989) recommended involving five

to 25 participatns who have all experienced a similar phenomenon, while Creswell (2012) recommended three to 10 individuals for a phenomenological study. Vagle's (2014) approach is less specific; he recommended that the sample size match the complexity of the phenomenon being studied. Based on these recommendations, the current study included nine students who had applied to Rowan University and 11 who applied to UMass Boston, as well as a mix of students, some of whom completed a summer college-access program and some who elected to attend a community college. This brought the total sample size for the study to 20 student participants.

Data Collection

Data collection for my study combined two qualitative methods, focus groups and individual interviews, drawing upon the conceptual framework described earlier. The purpose was to understand how FGLI students make college decisions and experience the first year of college, and how both phenomena may have been shaped by economic, policy, and higher education contexts, and institutional agents and their own habitus. Although focus groups alone can be used to gather research data, Morgan (1996) acknowledged that they are often combined with other approaches, most commonly interviews or surveys. I conducted five separate focus groups for this study, bringing together the 20 student participants.

Prior to each focus group, I asked participants to complete a short questionnaire that gathered information about their parents' education level, their financial aid eligibility, the number of courses they took their first year in college, their cumulative GPA, and whether they withdrew from any courses during their first year of study. Focus groups were selected as the initial method of data collection because they help garner

greater understanding by allowing participants to interact and validate their experiences (Mertens, 2014). Focus groups also have the benefit of giving voice to and empowering marginalized groups (Morgan, 1996), such as FGLI students in higher education.

Focus groups occurred between May 2017 and October 2017. Two of the focus groups were held face-to-face and three were conducted online utilizing Zoom, a video-conferencing technology. All focus groups were recorded at the consent of the participants and ranged from 45 to 75 minutes. A typical approach to starting qualitative research is to ask a "grand tour," or general questions, followed by more specific questions (Creswell, 2012; Mertens, 2014); Krueger and Casey (2014) recommended that researchers begin focus groups using a similar method, by asking a question that is more empirical, to build a comfort level within the group, and then proceed with transition questions and key questions pertaining directly to the study.

Each focus group in this study was divided into two segments, each corresponding with one of the research questions guiding this study (see Appendix A for the focus group protocol). The first segment of the focus group attempted to gather information about the decision-making process students undertook when selecting a college, while the second phase gathered information on participants' then-current experience at the institution they were attending. In addition, participants were asked to reflect on their decision-making process when faced with the opportunity to participate in a summer college-access program.

The second phase of data collection included semi-structured interviews of students who had participated in the focus groups. Generally, conducting interviews as a second phase allows researchers to utilize the wide range of experiences and perspectives

gathered during the focus group but to then gain deeper insights through one-on-one interviews. I conducted interviews after an initial analysis of the focus group data, which helped generate the interview questions. A total of six individual interviews were conducted, three with community college attendees and three with summer college-access participants who had enrolled at UMass Boston or Rowan University. Open-ended questions were asked to clarify themes that emerged during the focus groups, including information about how students compared financial aid packages, how they utilized the support of guidance counselors, and a few clarification questions about the use of advisors at community colleges and any prior experience they had had within the community college setting. Although the six interviews helped provide more clarification and description of the experiences shared during the focus group, no new information was revealed. The interviews helped reinforce that the previously established themes represented the underlying decision-making processes and experiences of participants but did not yield new areas to explore in relation to this study. During the interviews several participants referenced previous comments made during the focus group. For these reasons it was determined that a saturation point had been reached.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis often proceeds on two different levels, one that is general to the broader research method selected and one that is more consistent with the specific qualitative design selected. In this study, the data collected during the focus groups were analyzed, coded, and themed before the semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed. The analysis at each phase was performed in a manner consistent with transcendental phenomenology, outlined by Moustakas (1994). This

approach allowed me to reflect on my preconceived notions, biases, and experiences with the phenomena, and then to proceed with the analysis in search of the meaning of each participant's experience. Moustakas (1994) outlined a process that is less reliant on historical meaning and that provides a rigorous data analysis procedure that balances both objective and subjective approaches to knowledge.

At both the focus group and interview stages, comments collected from the students were compiled to understand the breadth of their experiences, in a procedure defined by Moustakas (1994) as "horizonalization." During this time, the goal was not to formulate patterns or themes but to understand who assisted students with their college decision-making process and what was important, and then to understand their general experience during the first year. Audio recordings were transcribed utilizing an online transcription service, and the documents were compared to the audio files to ensure consistency. A review of the full interview transcripts provided a broad understanding of how students made college choice decisions and experienced their first year of college.

The next step was to eliminate statements given during the interviews that were clearly beyond the scope of the study and to create themes and meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). With the assistance of the qualitative data analysis tool NVivo, nodes, or themes and meaning units, were established, leading to the creation of textural and structural descriptions. Textural descriptions related to what the students experienced, and structural descriptions explained how students experienced the phenomenon.

Direct quotations from participants (included in Chapter 4) comprised descriptive passages and embodied the experiences of students who had participated in a summer college-access program and those who had attended a community college. If a true

transcendental phenomenological approach had been taken, descriptive passages would have led to the creation of essence statements. Essence was understood in its traditional sense, as a universal truth, or the "constant identity that holds together and limits the variations that a phenomenon can undergo" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 242). However, in adopting a post-intentional approach, this study did not consider essence as a final statement but rather a tentative manifestation accounting for contexts and situations. A conscious decision was made not to synthesize the overall decision-making process and experience of the two groups, but instead to allow the full descriptions to represent their story. This decision respected the uniqueness of each student and recognized that the participants were in their first year of college. Each participant's story was unique and not yet complete.

Role of the Researcher

Recognizing up front that "relationships always exist between the researcher and those being researched," it is important to understand my upbringing, current occupation, scholar-practitioner focus, and philosophical worldview, and how each shaped the focus of this study (Rossman & Rallis, 2011 p. 1343). Exploring my worldview, or the basic set of beliefs that guide action, helps explain the decisions I made regarding my research design and method (Creswell, 2013). This is particularly important when using a phenomenological approach. As Vagle (2014) stated, the primary purpose of phenomenology as a research method is "to study what it is like as we find ourselves being in relation with others and other things" (p. 20). Understanding and investigating what one knows, referred to by Vagle (2014) as bridling, requires self-examination and

an understanding of one's own experiences with the phenomenon or phenomena being studied.

As a first-generation college student who had attended a large public high school and was raised in a working-class family, my habitus did not guarantee college enrollment. Personal motivation, interaction with high school professionals who provided guidance, and the opportunity to see a college campus during a summer leadership program all contributed to my enrollment in a four-year private college. Like many first-generation students from low-income families, the cost of attending college was a major factor in my decision-making process; indeed, I had many conversations with my parents about attending less expensive state universities. Concerns over cost, as well as a general lack of understanding of the college search process, certainly impacted the list of institutions to which I applied.

Now, as an enrollment manager at an urban, public research university, my days are divided between meeting institutional goals and finding the time to serve as an institutional agent for prospective college students. As Stanton-Salazar (1997) described them, institutional agents have the ability to transmit or negotiate the transmission of valuable information. This may include information about school programs, tutoring and mentoring, assistance with career decision making, and college admissions from teachers, counselors, social service workers, clergy, and community leaders (Stanton-Salazaar, 1997).

I approached this study of the pathways FGLI students take toward a baccalaureate degree with an understanding of the important role my colleagues and I play in providing student access to key information throughout the process. Research on

college choice has highlighted disparities in how underrepresented groups, including FGLI students, approach the process, including applying to fewer institutions and often institutions that are academically less selective (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000, 2001). Like guidance counselors and teachers, admissions professionals and college administrators can also provide key information to underrepresented students, who often do not have access to informal or formal social networks (Gonzalez et al., 2003). Yet, barriers often prevent college personnel from working directly, on the "frontline," with students in need of the most support, since their days are monopolized by other tasks associated with meeting institutional objectives. It is within the capacity of institutional agents that college administrators can provide social capital for students who may not have access to accurate college information. Exploring how this relationship impacts the decision-making process and experience of underrepresented students was a driving force of this study.

My professional goals were also well aligned with the mission of the Leadership in Education doctoral program at the University of Massachusetts Boston, which is designed for working professionals focused on opportunities, challenges, and concerns around urban higher education. The scholar-practitioner focus of the program allows working professionals to study and contextualize the challenges they see in their daily work experiences. Challenges such as access to higher education, equitable experiences for underserved populations, and the stratification of higher education cannot be fully understood without exploring the historical roots of the problems, but are then best addressed by administrators working directly within institutions and with the students impacted by these social constraints. Bringing to light the experiences of FGLI students

who had aspirations for a baccalaureate degree fulfilled my personal, professional, and scholarship agenda.

One could contend that, as a college administrator who has worked exclusively at four year-colleges, I have a natural tendency to favor that institutional type. Although I have worked frequently with community college students making the transition to a four-year college and have collaborated on projects with administrators at two-year colleges, my educational and professional experience is still largely grounded in four-year institutions. Prior to this study, in an attempt to better understand the community college environment, I participated in a small qualitative study with a local community college that examined the experiences of two-year college administrators working at a transfer center. This experience helped further my understanding of community colleges and, more particularly, opened my eyes to the importance of supporting community college students and the work that advisors do on a daily basis.

Worldview

The role the researcher plays in a study is best understood by exploring his or her worldview or philosophical orientation. Mertens (2014) acknowledged that many researchers conduct a study without ever having explored the way they view the world; however, this does not mean they do not have assumptions that shape the decisions they make. Although the concept of paradigms has been used to mean different things, Morgan (2007) defined paradigms as "shared belief systems that influence the kinds of knowledge researchers seek and how they interpret the evidence they collect" (p. 50).

I approach my research from a pragmatic viewpoint, which allows me to focus on problem-oriented research that is of value to me in both my scholar and practitioner roles.

Early pragmatists like William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead did not believe that social science inquiry could access truth through a singular scientific method (Mertens, 2014). Search for meaning began not with one method or set of methods but rather with ordinary experiences (Maxcy, 2003), and the purpose of the search was to seek clarity and understand consequences (Cherryholmes, 1992). Pragmatists view scientific research in social, historical, and political contexts, and believe that past experiences do not merely report historical occurrences but help explain future observations and experiences. Early pragmatists believed that the lines of actions one takes, or actual behavior, relates to the method of research one chooses to pursue (Mertens, 2014).

The second wave of pragmatism, which began after 1960, drew from early pragmatists but searched for richer means of inquiry and focused on common sense and practical thinking (Cherryholmes, 1992; Maxcy, 2003). Pragmatists are comfortable with the reality that though there is a single world, individuals have their own interpretation of that world (Mertens, 2014). The goal is to pursue research that centers on the pursuit of desired ends and places value on consequences and what makes a difference.

My focus on the pathways FGLI students pursued to a baccalaureate degree was driven by my own background and practitioner experience, as well as a commitment to focusing on the problem and understanding the consequences. Although many pragmatists conduct mixed-methods research, this qualitative study followed a structured phenomenological approach and included descriptive statistics related to the student participants.

Ethical Considerations and Research Permission

Following a specific design and method alone does not ensure that a study is conducted in an ethical and politically sensitive way, nor does it address the many audiences that will evaluate the trustworthiness of a study from a variety of unique perspectives. Rossman and Rallis (2011) recommend three interrelated sets of standards, framed as questions, for determining the trustworthiness of a qualitative research project: (1) Was it conducted according to norms for acceptable and competent research practices? (2) Did it honor the participants? (3) Was the researcher sensitive to the politics of the topic and setting?

According to Rossman and Rallis (2011), research conducted according to norms for acceptable and competent research practices includes linking research to theory, providing a chain of reasoning, and responding to clear questions. The current study utilized social capital as a theoretical framework to investigate the relationships two different groups leveraged during the college decision-making process and throughout participants' first year of study. Social capital helps explain how social networks are created and provides a broader understanding of how individuals can benefit from participation in groups. Social capital not only explains the resources individuals can access within social networks, but also the quality of the resources made available through and within relationships. Social capital is constrained for many underserved populations but important to their success in higher education.

Honoring participants was central to this study and was one of the factors considered when selecting a phenomenological approach, a method that provides an opportunity to understand the lived experiences of participants. However, other

considerations needed to be made, including fair treatment of all participants and ensuring their anonymity (Flick, 2009). Informed consent was collected at the outset of the study, and each participant was given an overview of the research and could withdraw from the study at any point. Ethical implications were considered at all stages of this study, including after the data were collected, and as part of this process, I reflected on my own personal experiences and biases in an attempt to minimize pre-understanding and preconceived notions, consistent with the practices of phenomenological research. As Flick (2009) cautioned, collected data should not be judged on a personal level. To avoid this, I needed to identify my biases, set them aside, and analyze participants' statements without judgement. Utilizing Moustakas's (1994) prescribed data-analysis methodology, I was better able to maintain a consistent and transparent approach.

Each study institution granted institutional review board approval. This approval provided an external review ensuring that necessary precautions were in place to protect the confidentiality of the participants and that the study would proceed in a consistent manner without causing harm to the individuals involved.

Delimitations and Limitations

Before considering the study findings (presented in Chapter 4 and 5), it is important to recognize how specific decisions made early in the research process framed this study, as well as limitations that were beyond my control.

A large portion of the data gathered for this study were acquired through focus groups. A focus group is a common method of qualitative data gathering that has the benefit of creating a safe environment for participat interaction and eliciting the voices of individuals who may otherwise be marginalized. Yet, the method also has weaknesses,

which should be recognized. As the moderator of each focus group, I played an important role guiding the conversation but tried to avoid limiting or steering the conversation in a particular direction. Focus groups are manufactured, not natural occurrences, and they can therefore create an environment in which participants may exaggerate their experiences or refrain from sharing a particular detail to avoid being judged by the group. With this in mind, follow-up interviews were conducted to probe deeper into some of the themes that emerged from the focus groups and to give individuals an opportunity to comment on topics in a more a private setting.

This qualitative study analyzed data gathered from focus groups and from individual interviews of 20 FGLI students to understand their college decision-making processes and first-year experiences. This sample size was appropriate for a phenomenological study, and measures were taken to randomize the selection of students; however, some of the selection efforts may have skewed toward participants who were more likely to have a specific experience. To identify qualified participants, lists of students who had been invited to participate in a summer college-access program were cross-referenced with the National Student Clearinghouse. Participants who were on the list as having been invited to complete a summer college-access program but not matched in the National Student Clearinghouse database were not contacted; therefore, their experiences were not represented in this study.

Participants at the four-year colleges who met a particular criterion were identified with assistance from administrators. This selection assistance could potentially have skewed the search results toward participants who were more engaged on campus and had already established a relationship with an administrator. This certainly did not

diminish their experience or the findings, and in some respects further exemplified the relationships FGLI student participants may have created with staff and administrators.

A limitation of this study was the timeframe in which the data were collected. Study participants were asked to reflect on both their college decision-making process and their experience in college. In most cases, this challenged the participants to relive and comment on a decision made more than a year previous. Therefore, students' responses may not have represented their experiences as accurately as they would have if those experiences had been observed while they were encountering it. Of course, it was not possible to observe students on a daily basis over the course of their college decision-making process and during their first year of college. However, focus groups provided an opportunity to delve deeper into experiences that could not be observed naturally due to temporal limitations.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS: DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

This study employed a phenomenological approach in order to understand the decision-making processes and lived experiences of FGLI college students. The findings were organized by the two research questions guiding the study; this organizational structure, recommended by qualitative researchers (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012), helped relate the findings and themes to the central questions of the study. Since the research goal was not to analyze the individual effectiveness of one college access program compared to another, or to compare the effectiveness of one community college to another, the findings are presented here through the lenses of two groups: college access program participants and community college attendees. Specifically, within these two categories, participant anecdotes highlight how each individual experienced the phenomena.

Every participant in the study was either first-generation, low-income, or both—student characteristics that were central to this study. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the focus group participant characteristics, including their institutional affiliation and whether they self-identified as first-generation or low-income.

Table 1

Focus Group Participant Characteristics

Overall Population Information	
Total Number of Participants	20
Identified as First-Generation	12
Identified as a Pell Grant Recipient	18
Institution Specific Information	
UMass Boston Affiliation:	
Attend UMass Boston	7
Applied to UMass Boston but attend a Massachusetts community college	4
Rowan University Affiliation:	
Attend Rowan University	5
Applied to Rowan University but attend a New Jersey community college	4

A focus group questionnaire asked participants to provide information about the number of courses completed, course withdrawls, and GPA after the first semester (see Appendix B). In general, participants were traditional-aged, first-time freshmen who were completing their first year in college. Throughout the findings presented here, participants are identified by pseudonyms they selected.

Institutional Agents Guiding College Search

A portion of each focus group and follow-up interview was dedicated to understanding the institutional agents whom students leveraged as they began the college choice process. After gathering information about when FGLI students began their college search, each participant was asked to share whom assisted with the process.

Although there were similarities related to the approaches the two groups took, there were important differences, both of which are addressed in the following sections, beginning with the support received from school officials.

Guidance Counselors, Organizations, and Teachers

Collectively, participants confirmed the pivotal role that guidance counselors played and often mentioned meeting with a guidance counselor at some point during their high school career to discuss college. Findings revealed variations in how often college access program participants and community college attendees utilized the support of counseling staff and the extent of the relationship that guidance counselors had with participants. A few community college attendees identified guidance counselors as having assisted them with the search process, but when asked to elaborate on the conversations they had had with their guidance counselors, they described their interactions in superficial or vague terms.

For instance, as Dina, a community college attendee, described her experience working with her guidance counselor, “Well, Ms. Wiseberg told me to apply through the EOF program, but other than that, I kind of just went to them and said that I looked at these colleges, and they gave me their opinions on them.” Later in the focus group, it became apparent that although Dina’s counselor had recommended that she apply to Rowan University’s Equal Opportunity Fund (EOF) program, she had shared few details about the program, included the program’s six-week requirement. Dina explained: “Yeah. Well, Ms. Wiseberg told me to apply through EOF because it helped a lot financially. So I did that, but I didn't realize the six-week program was a thing.”

C.J. also attended a community college and quickly identified that his counselor assisted with the college search process. The examples of support C.J. outlined included transactional services or advice, including his counselor's role in sending transcripts to the colleges he had applied to and encouragement to take the SATs more than once. When asked to elaborate more specifically on the advice his counselor had provided about which college to consider, C.J. responded, "Nah, we didn't go too deep into it."

Frank provided a similarly thin description of the support he received from his guidance counselor. Frank admitted to being a bit confused about how to begin the college search and initially focused on schools based on the major he wanted to pursue. The support his counselor provided centered on providing a list of possible schools to apply to, and Frank described their interaction this way:

> So I started, I believe, towards the beginning of my senior year. So, at first, I didn't know what I wanted to pursue, what major. So I just started it. I knew I wanted it to be something related to STEM, but I just didn't know what. So I just started applying to schools that had some type of good STEM majors. And … my school counselor was the one who actually told me that, Oh, you should apply to these schools.

Although Dina, C.J., and Frank confirmed meeting with a counselor, they described having only brief conversations with the counselor and did not indicate that there was any pattern to the meetings, suggesting that the counselor's role in their search process was minimum. Conversely, Jocelyn's account revealed the strongest support that any of the community college attendees had received from a guidance counselor. In

addition to one-on-one meetings, Jocelyn referenced larger group sessions as examples of the assistance she received:

> At my school, they would host a college night for seniors to explain to them the process of what to go through, and they also had another night for financial aid where they basically explained what to do with FAFSA and all that stuff.

During a follow-up interview, Jocelyn qualified the specific role her counselor had played:

> There were two types of conversations. So, the first time we met every—I'd say, my senior year, every single month. But as it got closer to college deadlines, almost every week. And then my school had a "financial aid night" and a "college aid night" for seniors where all the guidance counselors got together and were paired with students and would explain the process.

Henry, a community college attendee, also indicated that he had received assistance with the college search process but from an external group that appeared to be partnered with the high school and that began providing after-school support as early as his junior year. When asked to identify the group, Henry referred to it as "HERC" but was uncertain what that stood for; however, he did insist that the group did not consist of teachers and was an external group focused on providing SAT and scholarship information. Henry leveraged more support from this external group than from his family and friends, and described the support he received from the organization as follows:

> This program basically help[ed] you apply—try to help you apply to college and choose college. Like what kind of college you want to go to. And they also

> provide scholarships for you. It's a two-year program. So I started doing this kind of stuff when I was a junior. At first, they told me that I need to worry about the cost and the major I want to do and my SAT scores. They also helped you study for the SAT. That's why, when I looked for the colleges, I checked the SAT score first and how much [it] cost. And the big thing is the money. I need to apply [for] financial aid.

In contrast, college access participants more frequently cited meetings with guidance counselors and school officials, and provided richer descriptions of their interactions with these individuals. There also seemed to be a pattern of repeated meetings with school personnel among the college access program participants. Carol described the role her guidance counselor had played:

> So it was kind of hard picking a college for something that I wanted to do because I wasn't exactly sure. And he kind of helped me try and figure out what exactly I wanted to major in to begin with, to start out. And then go from there into looking to colleges that kind of fit my criteria of where I wanted to go.

Skylar articulated that her counselor not only helped with the college search process, but was also pivotal in introducing her to the college access program she eventually completed:

> My guidance counselor was the one who actually helped me … with the whole process of applying. And I think she was the one who applied for me for the PCI [Pre-College Institute], and then I got the response. I would just stop by in her office and talk to her. She was someone I just went to talk as a friend.

Ryan, a college access program participant, mentioned that she met with her high school guidance counselor twice a month; when asked if the counselor helped create a list of potential colleges, she stated, “I kind of did it on my own but then my guidance counselor kind of guided me towards maybe this is a better option than this school.” Mustafa, when asked if family had assisted him with the college search process, clarified, “Not really. I had a guidance counselor that I met with twice a month— once a month. And they helped me with applying to college, all that.”

The support that counselors provided to study participants within the high school environment created and fostered a college-going climate, the examples cited earlier outline the role they played in helping Carol, Skylar, Ryan, and Mustafa narrow their list of potential colleges to explore. Jessica, a college access program participant, was influenced indirectly to attend college by the behavior and actions of her teachers. In addition to direct conversations with counselors and college admission professionals, Jessica’s high school consciously promoted college to its students by having the teachers wear T-shirts every Friday that represented their respective college alma mater. This initiative created an opportunity for the teachers to share their college experiences with students; the impact this had on Jessica’s decision to attend UMass Boston was evident in her response to a quation about the colleges she considered:

> So some of the professors that I really looked up to, most of them came here. They graduated here from UMass Boston and they talked to me about how great of a school it is, and I was looking for a school that was really close to my house. So they talk[ed] to me about it and I was looking for a school that was affordable.

Although guidance counselors were most often identified as providing assistance with the college search process, the level of support and type of support was not consistent across all participants. Aside from Jocelyn, the support that community college participants received from guidance counselors appeared to be limited. In contrast, several college access program participants shared accounts of broader support from with their guidance counselors, who provided more than just lists of potential colleges to consider.

Family

Second to guidance counselors, family members were often identified by both the community college attendees and the college access program participants as assisting in the college search process. Relatives often provide the social capital students need to successfully navigate the college search process, and parents, siblings, and cousins were all mentioned in this study as offering advice or playing a specific role in helping participants understand the college search process. Similar to the variations in guidance counselor contact, college access program participants indicated more frequently that they had received encouragement to attend a four-year institution from a family member who had previous experience in this sector of higher education.

Henry, a first-generation college student who ultimately enrolled in a community college, described talking with his mother about enrolling at UMass Boston and participating in the college access program. According to him, her response was, “Okay, but … because of the cost, you can just go to BHCC first.” This brief interaction with his mother seemed to have the more significant impact on Henry’s decision to attend a community college as it did not leave any room to discuss alternative options. Although

Henry had the support of an afterschool program to provide information about SATs and scholarships, he did not discuss the summer program option with the afterschool group.

Jocelyn, a first-generation community college attendee, shared that her mother had attended a senior college night, and together they both attended a financial aid night. Despite her mother attending both programs, Jocelyn still looked to her cousin for assistance:

> I had help from my guidance counselors and from my older cousins because no one in my family has really gone to college in America. So they [i.e., the older cousins] were like the only ones around me that really knew what to do.

The events Jocelyn's mother attended at her high school to acquire more information about applying to college and receiving financial aid did not provide enough substance to overcome the fact that she was born outside the United States—and therefore was not familiar with U.S. higher education—and also had no prior college experience. During a follow-up interview, Jocelyn described in ore detail the support she sought from her cousin, who was attending a four-year college as a commuter and was very concerned about affording college. Her cousin's anxiety over cost fueled similar concerns in Jocelyn, as was apparent in the conversations they had:

> My main concern was financial aid, and dorming, and how everything would work out, and she commuted so she basically explained why it would help me to commute when it comes to money, and she made a lot of good points.

Daisy shared a similar perspective regarding interactions she had had with her cousin, who was enrolled at a four-year college, centered on the cost of college. Daisy's cousin

was saddled with student debt, and therefore the cost of college dominated their conversations:

> She didn't really get much financial aid, so she didn't really know about the financial aid aspect. But she did have a lot of debt at the time…. That was definitely one of her concerns when I was talking to her about which college I should pick.

In contrast to the community college attendees, college access program participants provided richer descriptions of the support they had received from family members, referencing parents, siblings, and extended family members who had provided positive accounts of their four-year experience as well as key information and guidance. Two college access program participants specifically mentioned siblings who were enrolled at a four-year college and described the direct and indirect impact the sibling had on their college choice decision-making. Kristen, for example, identified her older sister's influence and her help reducing the anxiety often associated with the college search process:

> I first started to look at colleges probably summer going into senior year. My sister is two years older than me, … she went to Rowan, and I went through the whole process of looking through schools in her shadow kind of. So the college process wasn't that … stressful for me.

Jeanette, who also participated in a college access program, commented on the assistance provided by her older brother, who was enrolled at a four-year college, although his attendance at a specific university helped steer her toward Rowan, since she wanted to created her own identity:

> My brother actually graduated from [In-State Public University]. Over the summers, I was a part of the Rutgers Future Scholars [RFS] program. I don't know if you know about that. It's kind of like a GEAR-UP program. So technically, I was supposed to go to [In-State Public University]. But I didn't want to go there. I didn't even apply, actually. I didn't want to go to [In-State Public University] because my brother, he graduated last year. So he's about three years older than me. And he was already going into his senior year last year. So I just wanted to start my own little thing. I didn't want to be my brother's sister. Because he's a really big person at [In-State Public University], because he was the face of RFS. So everyone knew him through the program. And they always have heard of me as his little sister. So I just wanted to make my own friends.

Although Kristen and Jeanette had different reactions to attending the same institution their siblings had attended, the mere presence of an older sibling at a four-year college made the process more familiar, and they both drew on that experience when conducting their own college search.

A few college access participants who were not first-generation but did identify as low-income provided rich accounts of how their parents influenced their decision-making process. Margaret was influenced by both an older sibling as well as her father, a college degree recipient. She recognized that her family members impacted both the timing and breadth of her college search:

> I started my college search probably the end of my junior to my senior year of college. My dad is a professor, and I have an older sister that … is going to college. So education was definitely really emphasized in my household. That's

why I probably got an early start into it. For my college search, Rowan wasn't my top choice either [laughter]. I applied to, I think, 20 undergrad schools.

Kiara, a college access program participant, was guided by her parents, both of whom had received bachelor's degrees. Their prior experience in higher education influenced how they perceived a two-year college, and they shared their perceptions with Kiara:

> I also made my choice, but it was also my parents' because they saw going to a two-year college, it limits you. So I might change my mind or something so they were pushing me to go to a four-year college.

Mary, a college access program participant, did not have parents with experience in college and instead drew from her cousin's higher education experience:

> Yeah, my cousin. She goes to [In-State Public University]. I think she's in her fourth year, so she was just telling me what to look out for, what colleges are best and … so I pretty much took advice from her.

There is no denying the influence Margaret's and Kiara's parents had on their respective college search process and ultimately the type of institution they would attend. Similar to Mary, Margaret and Kiara selected a four-year college because they each had a close family member with prior experience in that institutional type and therefore placed greater value on that sector of higher education.

Peers

A final group that was identified by participants as assisting with the college search process was peers. Two college access program attendees, both first-generation college students, drew from a network of friends to help navigate the college search

process. Mustafa, a Somali student, found comfort talking to a group of friends who were also Somali. They provided him with valuable advice and helped introduce him to UMass Boston:

> My friends were in high school with me, some of them I know from—I just meet them in a Somali community that I met them outside of school or played soccer with them. That is how I got to know them. And they told me about UMass Boston and all great stuff they'd asked the college. They were at Boston and they were older than me. I just got to know them because they were Somalian. It was easy for me to communicate with them in their native language ... and a lot of them, actually, I used to play soccer with them and that is how I got to know the college. And they kind of helped me, actually, navigate the college experience.

When Mustafa was asked during a follow-up interview to provide some specific examples of the support this group of friends provided, he said:

> Through conversation, actually. I usually called them or used to actually have conversations with them about college, how to kind of register for classes and what days to go, the best days to go, how to set up the best schedule, all that.

Yarelis identified the support she received from friends as well as a teacher. This network of four-year college attendees not only provided valuable college search information but appeared to influence her decision-making:

> Well, I wanted to try different things because part of me wanted to stay in Boston but I also wanted to go outside a bit. And so I had friends who actually talked to me about different [schools] like [In-State Private University]. I have friends from [In-State Private University] and I really wanted to go to [In-State Private

> University], but I don't know, I just changed my mind afterwards. One of my teachers in high school graduated from UMass Boston and so I used to love him [laughter]. And he actually talked to me a lot about UMass Boston. And one of my friends graduated from here as well.

Jonathan enrolled at a community college and discussed going through the college search process with the support of friends. He is an undocumented student and sought advice from friends who were also undocumented to understand how they had approached this challenge. Although Jonathan applied to UMass Boston, his peer group also encouraged him to look at community colleges, which were more affordable:

> I had a lot—I had friends assist with the essay part and trying to help me find schools. I'm undocumented, and so for me it was just difficult trying to find a school that would give me good financial aid. And so I had friends kind of suggest what schools I could apply to and see if I could get into those.

The accounts from each of the college access program participants and community college attendees highlighted their attempts to expand their network and access greater information about college. The focus groups and interviews with FGLI student participants revealed that college access program participants had greater success connecting with siblings who were in college or peer groups that shared positive accounts of their experiences at four-year colleges. Community college attendees who did connect with peers or relatives were often influenced by networks that shared concerns about cost and encouraged the participants to consider community college as an alternative.

Influences Guiding College Search

The focus groups and interview with college access program participants and

community college attendees revealed a common set of influences impacting the college decision-making process, including cost, location, and program of interest. However, the cost of tuition, fees, and room and board, and, more importantly, the out-of-pocket expense after accounting for financial aid, dominated the decision-making process for participants in both groups.

During the focus groups, participants were asked to discuss the greatest concerns they had had when looking at colleges and then to summarize their search and identify key influences. One by one, community college attendees and college access participants echoed previous student responses in identifing cost and financial aid as the most significant considerations. C.J., Daisy, and Dimitri, all community college attendees, each articulated succinctly how important cost was to the decision-making process using similar terms such as “I would say the money, definitely the money” to “The cost was definitely my number one thing” and “[It] came down to cost.”

Margaret and Ryan, two college access program participants, shared similar sentiments and also identified cost as their greatest concern, summing up their decision-making process this way: “The reason why I chose Rowan was definitely the financial aspect” and “Yeah, mainly the money situation.”

The collective voice of FGLI participants in this study spoke to the importance of and consideration placed on the perceived cost of college. However, when asked to speak more specifically about the cost of higher education, in order to understand the degree to which participants considered financial aid, academic reputation, institutional type , and selectivity, some variations arose regarding how the two groups understood cost.

Dina, a community college attendee, initially began the summer college-access program at Rowan University but then quickly decided to leave the program, justifying her decision in terms of cost. She was one of just a few community college attendees who specifically mentioned comparing the cost of enrolling at an institution after financial aid had been considered:

> I definitely wanted to stay in [New] Jersey, so I looked at [In-State Public University]. And I just didn't like their campus. It felt kind of like a ghost town. And then, [In-State Private University] but I also got into Rowan, and Rowan was the cheaper choice. So I decided to go there. Oh, yeah. [In-State Private University], I was going to do the EOF program at [In-State Private University], too. I think after financial aid, it was like 15,000 [dollars] for a semester, and then Rowan was 5,000 [dollars]. And then I can actually go to school for free at community college, essentially.

Daisy, a community college attendee and the first in her family to attend college, alluded to comparing prices when looking at the cost of an out-of-state private university before ultimately enrolling at a community college:

> I started late looking at colleges actually. I just don't know why I made this decision. My school counselor and my therapist actually went over different options for me because I wanted to go to Rowan. I also wanted to go to [Out-of-State Private College]. But [Out-of-State Private College] didn't work out because of the money, and I just had a lot going on at the time, so it saved me money.

The college access program at Rowan has the additional benefit of providing full

financial aid for for tuition and fees. Essentially, for students like Dina and Daisy, this makes attending the institution free, with the exception of room and board costs. However, the perception from Dina and Daisy was that Rowan would cost more than attending a community college, which influenced their decision.

Frank, a community college attendee, did less comparison of institutional costs and was influenced more by broader contexts, including the in-state tuition rates offered at public colleges in New Jersey:

> I kind of wanted to go out of state, but at the same time, I [had]—financial problems, so we [i.e., the counselor and he] narrowed it down to within the state, which was probably a lot cheaper, in-state tuition…. [S]ince I live in New Jersey, we narrowed it down to just colleges in New Jersey.

When Frank was asked if he considered any additional factors beyond cost, including selectivity, reputation, type of institution (e.g., two-year, four-year, public, or private colleges), he reiterated the importance of cost alone, stating, "Well, money, financial-wise, yes. Private, no. I mean, I really wasn't looking into whether it's private or public that much."

Later in the focus group, Frank shared more about his decision-making process and the influence the program of study had initially on his college search. Pursuing an engineering degree was important to Frank, and when he was not accepted directly into the engineering school at the in-state private university, he decided to attend a community college based on cost:

> So at first, I was set on … [In-State Private University]. But I applied for both the School of Arts and Sciences and Engineering School, just in case I didn't get

> accepted to the Engineering School, which I didn't. But then they told me that I could still go to Arts and Sciences and transfer within a year. And I was like, "Oh, that's not bad. I'm still going to be there and taking pretty much the same classes. I'm just not going to be under them, Engineering School." So I was comparing the price. I was looking at the price. It seemed reasonable at the time, but then some of my friends, they said community college, and they told [me] how much … the tuition [was] and all that stuff, so I'm just like, "Oh, really?" And thinking about it, it's like, if I would have went to [In-State Public University], the School of Arts and Sciences, I would still have to apply to transfer to the Engineering School. So I'm just like, "Okay, so I would just have to apply to transfer either way, so I might as well just go to community college."

From Frank's perspective, he was faced with the reality that either path he selected would result in transfer. Either he would transfer internally into the engineering school at an in-state private university or transfer from a community college to a four-year institution. He did not see value in enrolling at a four-year college only to pursue a major that was not his first choice. He was also lured by the cost savings. Although Rowan has a college of engineering, Frank was under the impression that it did not and therefore did not give the campus much consideration.

Jocelyn initially focused her college choice on a specific program of study and narrowed her search to an out-of-state private university due to its strong criminal justice program, but the cost was prohibitive. She explained how program of study and reputation were initially important, but during the course of her search, the decision ultimately hinged on cost and led her to enroll at a community college: "Reputation was

something. At first, it was more reputation, but then as time went by, that just kind of went to the back of my mind, and I was focusing more on financial aid and stuff like that."

Henry, a community college attendee, shared that both his mother and friends made solid arguments based on cost and influenced his decision to attend a community college. During the focus group, Henry did not discuss comparing the costs of attending specific institutions; rather, he summed up his college choice and the influence his peer group had had in this way: "And my friends, they recommend me to go to [In-State Public Community College] because they say you can save money and the credits. You can transfer to a four-year college. So it will be a big savings."

The sentiments shared by the community college attendees revealed that their primary decision-making process revolved around cost. Although the participants considered other factors, such as program of study, in-state/out-of-state status, and reputation, the perceived cost of higher education in large part guided participants to a community college. Some accounts provided by the community college attendees revealed their lack of information before and during the college choice process, including a lack of awareness about the program offerings at a particular school or of the true cost of attending a school after financial aid was considered.

Focus group participants who had completed a summer college-access program and then enrolled at a four-year college also noted the significance of cost. Evident within this group was a greater likelihood that they had compared the cost to attend an institution after considering financial aid, and they also noted additional characteristics they considered, including program of study, location, reputation of an institution, and

institutional type. Kristen, for instance, described comparing the cost of attending an out-of-state school to that of attending Rowan and of participating in the summer college-access program:

> My top choice was [Out-of-State Private College], in New York, but that school was out of state so I didn't get in-state tuition, and it was already really expensive. So it kind of narrowed down my choices. And then I got the offer to come to PCI at Rowan, and I was going to be given a lot of grant money, and they were going to financially help me a lot. So it kind of just really shadowed out all the other colleges, and … I [just] focused on Rowan.

Kristen had become familiar with Rowan because her sister, who is two years older, had attended the institution prior to transferring to another college. Visiting the campus when her sister attended provided a certain degree of comfort, but when coupled with a strong financial aid package, her decision to enroll was solidified: “I've been on the campus before so I was comfortable with the environment, and they really helped me out financially.”

Margaret’s college search process was one of the most extensive of all the participants in the focus group and was influenced heavily by her parents, who had attended college. Margaret wanted a college that was well known for the major she wished to pursue, but she also needed viable financial options:

> I applied to a lot because I wanted to have options not only for … financial availability, but I also wanted options in terms of national ranking for the university, especially for my program since it's kind of relatively new for Rowan University. So, in the end, what I ended up doing was coming to Rowan because

> it was cheapest. My number one was [Out-of-State Public University], but they only gave me like $11,000, and that just wasn't going to cut it out of state. So I had to come here.

The influence of cost became even more apparent later in the focus group when Margaret was asked if the program was the most important factor. She replied:

> No. The reason why I chose Rowan was definitely the financial aspect—and I really liked the campus, I guess you would say. Mainly, I was sold by the fact they were going to give me so much more money than any other school I applied to.

Although national rankings in a specific program initially guided Margaret's college search process, the reality of paying out-of-state costs at a public university forced her to change directions. Margaret alluded to the fact that she liked the campus; however, Rowan was not her first choice, which became evident when she stated that she had to enrolled at the institution. She was persuaded to attend Rowan due to the financial aid package she received and the fact that it was more affordable than her preferred choice, an out-of-state public university.

Some college access program participants considered the type of institution as well as cost when choosing a college. Jessica wanted to attend a four-year rather than two-year institution and expressed this when deciding finally to participate in the summer college-access program at UMass Boston:

> And I got accepted to [In-State Public Community College], [In-State Private Two-Year College], but these are community colleges, and community colleges were not really a priority for me, and UMass Boston was my first [choice]. So I

was like, “Okay, what am I going to do?” Because these aren't adding [i.e., she was referred to the summer program and not directly accepted into UMass Boston]. There's no way around it. And, plus again, the money. So that was a big thing for me and that's the reason I came here [to UMass Boston].

Mary, a college access program participant who later revealed that cost was the primary factor in her decision to enroll at UMass Boston, also had a strong preference for attending a four-year college:

So the thing with the two-year college or community college, I feel like once you finish your two years, you get sidetracked and then you want to do something else. I feel like if you come to a four-year university, they'll guide you throughout all the four years and you'll get your bachelor's degree.

Jeanette, a college access participant, conducted a fairly extensive college search, looking at both in-state and out-of-state institutions and ultimately applying to 10 schools. Although she was not able to remember how she became aware of the Equal Opportunity Fund at Rowan University, she discussed comparing the cost of attending the two in-state schools she applied to and acknowledged that cost emerged as the primary factor in her decision making:

I applied to [In-State Public University]. I got in, but they didn't give me a lot of money. They only gave me $500 for early admission, and that was it. I didn't even know how I applied to Rowan's EOF [program], and I didn't apply to [In-State Public University’s] EOF. So basically, it was either down to getting money and going for the summer or not going for the summer and not having any money at all. So that's basically how I decided with that.

Despite having the support of her mother to attend any college of her choosing and having the desire to attend a school out of state, Jeannette explained that her decision-making process evolved over time and eventually came down to cost:

> I wanted to go … out-of-state, but through the process, because my mom, she always told me—because she didn't get to go to college, and she didn't get to go away, and I don't have any kids and stuff—so she was just like, "You can go where you want to go." But then it started getting down to, you apply, and then those schools send you the financial aid. They send you your package. So then it started getting down to, "Okay, well, this school is giving me X amount of money, but I'm still going to have to take out a loan. And then, that school's giving me this money, but I'm going to have to take out double loans." So it was like, "Okay, if I didn't live here, I would be going to school for free."

Several focus group participants who completed the summer college-access program at UMass Boston identified location and program of study as important factors in their initial search, but then cited cost as the ultimate decision maker. When asked why she applied to [In-State Public University] and UMass Boston, Kiara recalled that it was due possibly to proximity to her home and then mentioned that she had compared the cost of the two institutions before making a decision:

> I don't remember, but I guess it was, they weren't that far, so UMass Boston was kind of the closest, so I chose to come here. And I remember [In-State Public University] didn't offer me that much of money, like financial aid and stuff, so I made my choice of coming here.

Mary also limited her college choice to institutions in the Boston area due to her at-home responsibilities. Location, coupled with cost, shaped her decision-making process:

> I was looking for colleges that are local because I spend time taking care of my brother, so I wanted something that was affordable yet close by to my house. And also, I had this program that I was admitted to in high school called Upward Bound. And they basically help you with all the applications and finding scholarships and everything. So it was pretty easy, for the most part.

Several college access program participants applied to private institutions but then concluded that the cost would be substantially higher. Ryan, a first-generation college student, wanted initially to go to college far away from home and allowed athletic interests to shape her college search process. After looking at several out-of-state private institutions, however, she recognized that she was not going to receive as much funding as she needed to attended some of the institutions: “Then I realized those schools don't give a lot of money, so then UMass Boston's like a financial decision for me.”

Mustafa settled on UMass Boston after receiving a financial aid package from his first-choice institution, a private college in Boston:

> I remember my senior year looking for schools to go [to] and I was very interested [in] doing business major. And the school that I really wanted to go [to] was [In-State Private University], and I get into it and I was very interested in [it]. I went a lot of places. At the end of it, I see the tuition, and when they give me my financial aid, it was crazy. It was 50 grand. I'm like, "Oh, that's crazy. Wow."

Although it appeared that a private college would be out of his financial reach, he remained focused on attending a four-year college. When another focus group participant shared her desire to attend a four-year college and not a community college, Mustafa confirmed that he had had the same preference:

> I didn't give myself a choice. I mean, that was the mindset…. If I can get into a four-year college, I'm going there. It's not an option then. And that's how I kind of felt it. Nobody told me to.

Likewise, Beltre recalled looking at [In-State Private University] because he wanted to study law. Yet, he came to terms with attending UMass Boston and participating in the summer college-access program after reviewing his financial aid packages:

> And so this was cool for me; I would get a lot of money without a loan, and the summer program—I decided that was a good opportunity for me to get the experience for coming here [to UMass Boston].

College access program participants and community college attendees often associated distance to a campus with higher costs, a perception that influenced their decision-making process. In addition to the perceived costs of attending college far from home, many focus group participants faced pressure to attend a college closer to home. This pressure, coupled with responsibilities to care for family members, overshadowed the college search process for several participants. Henry described the family responsibilities he had which influenced his decision to attend a local community college: "I go to [In-State Community College] because it's very close to my home. I couldn't go to somewhere very far because I need to take care of my parents. They can't speak

English." Henry assisted his parents with many day-to-day responsibilities because English was not their first language. They had come to rely on him for support, and Henry had resigned himself to continuing to provide this support while attending college.

Skylar, a college access program participant, had similar family commitments that required her to focus her search more locally:

> I wanted to stay close to home because of personal problems that were happening. My dad was undergoing surgery, and he had a couple done that year, so I just wanted to be in the area in case something went wrong. And then I ended up loving Rowan, so I stayed.

The factors driving the college decision-making process were often conflated. For example, Jeanette, a college access program participant who attended Rowan and lived on campus, initially gave the impression that she made her decision based on cost alone:

> But it's just, I guess, the affordability—it's close to home. It's about an hour [and] 10 minutes from my house. I actually commute four times a week home, because I work at home. So that's probably the reason why I'm here, to see my family. I do laundry at home, so I save money there.

Later in the focus group, when Jeanette was asked to speak more specifically about the other institutions she researched, she shared her strong interest in attending a college in North Carolina, but spoke openly about the pressure exerted by her mother to stay local:

> I actually wanted to really go to this school called [Out-of-State Private University]. It's in North Carolina. I got in and they gave me a lot of money, but my mom didn't want me to go so far, so I just ended up going here. She really

pushed for me to go here because it was so close, and she just wanted me to stay. So I just did.

This conversation made clear that cost was not the only factor Jeanette considered when selecting Rowan University. She had received a generous financial aid package from an out-of-state institution, but the pressure from her mother to remain close by persuaded her to stay in-state.

Carol, a college access program participant, feared leaving the local support network she had built up, and this influenced her decision to attend a college that was closer to where she grew up:

> Rowan actually wasn't my top choice either. My top choice was [Out-of-State Private College] over in New York. And I decided not to go there only because it was eight hours away, and I wanted to go to somewhere a little bit closer just so that way, in case I needed help with classes or I got into a situation where I missed home, I would be able to be closer to my family and to my friends. And the only college that I really knew was Rowan University because I grew up in Glassboro. So that was kind of why I chose Rowan because it was the one that I actually knew where it was, and what it consisted of in the campus, and it was something that I was used to. So I ended up going to Rowan.

Carol's decision to attend Rowan centered on her familiarity with the campus, since she had grown up in the same town. She also felt she had built a support network there and was not confident she would be able to create a similar support system if she attended an out-of-state college. This was a common theme among college access program participants. They sought opportunities to connect with school counselors, administrators,

and peers in order to create networks; in the case of Carol's college decision, she aimed to maintain that network.

Social Capital Influences College Access Program Consideration

In addition to elaborating on their decision-making process associated with selecting a specific college, focus group participants recalled their respective reactions to receiving an admission letter that made their enrollment contingent on the completion of a summer college-access program. All of the study participants were faced not only with selecting a college, but with the burden of deciding if they would complete a summer program in order to gain access to one of the four-year colleges to which they had applied. This study was interested in learning with whom FGLI students discussed the summer college-access program option, which aspects they considered, and how both impacted their college decision.

This area of the focus group garnered the widest range of responses. From anger and relief to complete confusion, participants shared how they processed the information they received from Rowan University and the University of Massachusetts Boston. Two participants seemed unaware they had been invited to complete summer college-access program. For example, Jonathan, a community college attendee, was asked how he reacted to the letter he received from UMass Boston about completing the DSP program. Jonathan responded:

> I don't remember getting this letter. So I have no idea what you're talking about. But if I did get it, I probably thought that I wouldn't be able to make it to the summer program, because I have a summer job. So I'm not in the state for the summer, so I wouldn't have been able to do that.

When asked how UMass Boston responded to his admission application, Jonathan stated, “I remember I got in, but I don't remember this program”.

Jonathan was not the only participant who seemed unclear about the terms of his admissions decision. When Frank, a first-generation community college attendee, was asked if he recalled getting a letter about participating in the Pre-College Institute at Rowan, he stated that he did not remember. When pressed to explain how Rowan responded to his application, he responded:

> Well, wait. I did get accepted. To Rowan. All right. I did get accepted. I believe I got a letter from them saying I got accepted to the computer science major or something. And I think that was that. That was it.

In his follow-up interview, Frank was asked if the acceptance letter he received from Rowan mentioned completing a summer program. At that point, it became apparent that Frank’s focus when making his college choice centered on the program of study he was accepted into, and he could not recall that his acceptance was conditional on completion of a summer program. “No, I don't think they did. They probably did, but I was just looking into what—like with the letter, I was just looking into what STEM field, I guess, I got accepted into.”

Frank’s comment was consistent with previous statements he had made about his college search decision making. Frank was focused solely on engineering and ultimately decided to attend a community college because another four-year college did not accept him directly into its engineering program. As stated previously, Frank was under the impression Rowan did not have an engineering program, and it is likely that the admission letter he received regarding the PCI program contributed to his confusion.

Jocelyn and C.J. both enrolled in a community college and acknowledged giving the summer program very little consideration. C.J. remembered briefly discussing the program with his counselor but could not remember the details. UMass Boston was not Jocelyn's first-choice college; she wanted initially to attend an out-of-state private school to study criminal justice, so she did not explore the summer program as a viable option. Regarding the letter she received about the DSP program, Jocelyn's responded, "I remember getting the letter, but I didn't really read or research … it or look into it."

The responses of several participants, including Henry, a first-generation community college attendee, reflected the limited understanding many underserved populations have about the college search process. Henry was an English as a second language student, and when he received a letter from UMass Boston asking him to take a free, on-campus language assessment test to determine appropriate placement in the summer program, he interpreted it as needing to complete a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam. Administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the TOEFL is one of the most widely used English-language exams. To register, students must find a testing center in their location, select an upcoming date, and pay $195. This perceived hurdle, coupled with prior summer plans, led him to dismiss the program as an option: "I remember I got [the letter]. It said that I didn't take [the] TOEFL, so I need to take this program. I wanted to participate in there, but I already bought the ticket, airplane ticket, to China."

Within the community college group, there was either confusion about the invitation to complete the summer college-access program or very little consideration given to this pathway. Aside from C.J., who had a very brief conversation with his

counselor, the community college attendeeds did not provide strong evidence of discussing this option with family, friends, counselors, or peers.

Beltre and Mustafa, both first-generation college students who participated in the summer college-access program at UMass Boston, reflected on their decision-making process and how they evaluated the need to complete the program and its benefits. Beltre expressed his dissatisfaction with having to complete a summer program but also his understanding that it could help prepare him for the future:

> So when I got the letter, I was disappointed because I would miss my summer. But then when I took a look at the letter and it explained what we were going to do, I self-analyzed it and I considered what I wanted, and I realized that, well, I'm going for a summer but it's the summer that's going to prepare me for the fall, and we're going to learn how it's going to work. Yeah, so that motivated me to go.

Mustafa compared UMass Boston's summer program with a similar requirement at another institution and felt the former was a better option:

> As I said before, when [In-State Public University] accepted me, and when they told me about the program, College Immediately, and they told me that I'd have to spend the whole semester there and I have to pay for it and I won't get any credit, so when UMass Boston's letter came for the DSP program, I was kind of relieved, like, "Okay, this is much better than what [In-State Public University] was offering me," so I didn't even hesitate. I was like, "Okay, I'm going here."

Mustafa continued to describe his decision-making process, and it became clear that completing the summer college-access program and gaining acceptance to UMass Boston were sources of pride for him:

> And I knew that I would make it because they told me that you have to do the DSP to go through UMass Boston. I was like, that's the way I'm going to do it, then. And I believed in myself and I did it.

Many focus group participants who ultimately completed the summer program at UMass Boston or Rowan had been guided, and at times persuaded, by friends, family, counselors, and college access program staff to complete the requirement. Kristen did not actually open the letter she received from Rowan University regarding the PCI program; her mother did, and she learned about this opportunity for her. Kristen's mother researched the financial assistance the program provided as well as the experience of alumni who had completed the program and used that to convince Kristen that she would benefit from the experience:

> I don't even remember receiving the letter actually…. All I remember is my mom, she called me one day and she was like, "Would you be interested in going to a six-week long program at Rowan where when you complete it, you'll be granted all this money and everything?" and I was like … "Of course," I was like, "No, I don't want to spend six weeks of my summer at school, and what are you talking about?" And then she said, "Well, if you do it, you can get all this good financial help and you can know the campus. You can get to know people." And so, of course, I was still really hesitant about it, but my mom kind of swayed me into it by telling me, "Well, looking up what the EOF office is, and seeing what the alumni said about it, and how much it's helped them with their books, and just all around … made them better students when they got—their first year in college because it is a huge transition." So that kind of just really helped me.

The level of support participants received from family varied. Kiara, a low-income student who participated in a college access program, did not receive strong encouragement from her sister to complete the program, which created ambivalence right up to the final deadline when she ultimately decided to participate in the program:

> So my sister read the letter and then she said, "Are you sure you want to go there?" And I said, "Of course, you know I've been waiting so long. I got into UMass Boston. I'm going." But then I was like, "I have to commit six weeks? Forget about it. I'm going to [In-State Public University]. Don't talk to me about it again." But then I remember it was the deadline—that last night I did not sleep, thinking [In-State Public University], UMass Boston. And I made my last decision coming here.

Other participants sought advice and clarification from staff who worked in their former high school college-access programs, or they reached out to the college access program staff at UMass Boston and Rowan to help determine in which direction they should proceed. Mary became uncertain after a conversation with staff from Upward Bound, a program she participated in during high school:

> I was honestly confused. I was like, “Did I get in? Am I accepted?” And then I did more research and I talked to my college program about it. And I found out that two or three students that went through the program that I did in high school went to DSP and actually some graduated and some are still in UMass Boston. So it's like, why not?

Yasmin was equally confused and reached out to staff in the EOF office at Rowan for help explaining the program:

> I had totally forgot thatI applied at EOF. So when I got that letter in the mail I was just like, "What did I apply for" But I was like, "Okay." So then I started reading the letter, and then to follow up they emailed me as well. And I think I talked on the phone with Miss Angela…. And then she [explained] the program a little bit more. Because at the time, I'm paying my way through school, so I have a full-time job. So I had to cut back my hours and only work on weekends. My boss was totally okay with it, and then I was like, "Okay. If it's beneficial for me, then I'll do it." And she said, "This is your only way to get accepted into the Rowan institution." And I was like, "Okay … I'll do it."

Kiara also reached out to an administrator responsible for overseeing the summer program at UMass Boston to seek clarification. She recalled being familiar with the campus since she had participated in TAG, a summer college-access program, during high school, so she returned to campus to get information about financial aid and to understand the requirements of the summer program. Kiara described her visit this way:

> One of the first people I met was Polly, because whenever I got my letter for DSP, I was like, “Yeah, I had a question,” and the first person to meet when I came was Polly [Coordinator of the DSP Program at UMass Boston]. And so she introduced herself, and since then I got to know her.

Yarelis ultimately participated in the DSP program but admitted that she was extremely upset when she received the decision letter in the mail; in fact, her initial reaction was not to attend. Constant pressure from a friend who also had to complete the same requirement helped change her mind:

> I was really mad. I was really upset. My answer was no. No. Since I got … to the U.S., I used to go to my country every summer to go see my mom. And I remember that summer. I was like, “No, it's my first summer after graduating from high school. Finally, I get to enjoy it.” But when I saw that letter, I was like, “I'm not going, it's my summer.” And then I had this friend that … was completely on me every day and was saying, "Yarelis, you need to go. Come on. I'm going. You have to go." But yeah, he kind of like helped me. He explained to me everything we were going to do, like it's just going to prepare you.

Ryan had initially determined that he would not participate in the summer program but was influenced by many people, including her parents, guidance counselor and teacher. Their persistence shifted her mindset:

> I realized that probably a month before I graduated, and … in my head, I'm like, “I'm not doing this. I'm just going to go to a two-year and transfer out.” Then everyone's talking to me like, "Hey. It's not that bad.” My parents, my guidance counselors, teachers, telling me how other students had did it before. It's not that bad. Then I was just like, “Hey, whatever. I'll do it so they can leave me alone.”

The participants experienced a range of emotions in response to the invitation to complete a summer college-access program as part of their acceptance to a four-year college. Participants who did not complete the program either were unclear about what it was beforehand, had other commitments that prevented participation, or were not interested in the institution. For some of those who did complete the program, it was a source of pride, recognizing that it would help them once they entered college. Others

were not excited at first about participating but sought the counsel of friends, family, and/or administrators who helped persuade them to ultimately attend.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES

This study sought to understand how the experiences of FGLI students differed based on the different paths to higher education they pursued. Specifically, the study investigated how the first-year experiences of students who had completed a summer college-access program as part of their conditional acceptance into a four-year college compared to those of students who had enrolled directly in a community college.

To better understand this phenomenon, focus groups and interviews were conducted with student participants who were asked to share the experiences they had had with faculty and staff during their first year of college and to reflect on their engagement with peers and their participation in campus activities. The findings discussed in the following section relate to the second research question and sub-question: How did the first-year experience of FGLI students who attended a community college compare to those who completed a summer college-access program and subsequently enrolled in a four-year institution? How do the differences in FGLI students' experiences manifest in the relationships they fostered with faculty, staff, and peers? The section begins by examining the experiences this population had with faculty and staff.

Experiences with Faculty and Staff

Student participants in this study who completed a summer college-access program and those who enrolled in a community college were both asked to discuss the interactions they had with faculty, and to comment specifically on any experiences they had with faculty outside the typical classroom setting. Faculty and staff can often serve as institutional agents, and this study was interested in understanding how the formation of relationships with school officials may vary between the two populations based on their introduction to higher education and the type of institutions they attended.

Students who enrolled in a community college praised the support they received from their faculty, who often served in an advising capacity. Daisy, a community college attendee, spoke highly of her community college experience and praised her faculty for making it positive: “Overall, I enjoyed it. My college has a lot of good teachers that are really engaging and make you interested. I haven't had trouble with any of my classes”.

C.J. acknowledged that college was very different from high school and, like Daisy, recognized the community college faculty for contributing to his positive experience. “The professors, they were down-to-earth. They're understanding. I like that.”

Regarding interactions the students had with faculty outside the classroom, the community college student participants discussed how some faculty incentivized after-class meetings and office-hour visits. Jonathan, a first-generation community college student, was asked if he had engaged with faculty outside regularly scheduled class hours and he confirmed that he had met with two out of three of his professors. When asked if he had initiated the conversations with the two faculty, he said, “One of them, yes, and the other was part of the curriculum. You have to meet with the teacher.”

Although Jocelyn, a community college student, had not taken advantage of meeting with her faculty outside class hours, she knew how to reach them; as with Jonathan, interacting with the professor outside the classroom had been built into the course:

> I haven't met with any of my professors outside of class. Usually, if I need to speak to them, I'll just email them. But for one of my professors, she made it like an extra credit thing if we meet with her in her office at least one time throughout the semester.

In addition to faculty building after-class requirements into course syllabi, participants also spoke of community college faculty efforts to connect students with advising staff in order to engage students in longer-term course planning and to assist them with class registration. Henry, an ESL student, received extra credit from his sociology professor for visiting the advising, support, and career center at an in-state community college but also discussed getting additional help from his English professor:

> I've met my English reading teacher outside of class because of my homework. I needed help from them. I went to the Advising, Support and Career Center for scheduling my … next semester and the full schedule for a whole year because it's like an extra credit for my sociology class.

Later in the focus group, Henry complimented his community college for having a robust system in place that supports students:

> I like the system in [In-State Community College] because they have a lot of programs that can help me study…. I went to [the] tutoring center and did some

essay tutoring. They helped me a lot. I always have a problem with, like, writing essays or sometimes math.

Faculty at the community colleges seemed to be actively engaged in advising, and several students highlighted this dual faculty role. On two different occasions, Dina indicated that her professors had provided assistance with course registration. Early on in the focus group, Dina shared that her marketing teacher helped her with course scheduling. When asked later if her marketing teacher was her advisor or if she had been assigned an advisor, she replied, "No, but I [had] two professors offer, 'If you guys need help, just come to me and I can schedule your class.' I normally have one every semester that says it."

The frequency with which students had been assigned an advisor, knew who their advisor was, or had met with an advisor, varied across the community college participants. When Frank was asked to talk about the interactions he had had with faculty or advisors, he responded, "I mean, I go to office hours when I have questions, but that's it. I haven't really had to go to my counselor. I don't even know who my counselor is."

Daisy's experience differed from Frank's. She described being assigned an advisor who was also a faculty member in the major she was interested in pursuing, and she shared her experience meeting this advisor at the beginning of each semester:

Mostly, I just talk to her about which classes I should take so I can graduate without spending more money than I have to. It's more on registration. We've talked a few times because she is a psychology teacher, too. So she's mentioned

> classes that I should take that would be better once I move on to a four-year college.

Community college participants described varying levels of interaction with faculty outside typical class hours and also shared different accounts of the types of support they received from advisors. However, the faculty at the community colleges seemed to make fairly consistent attempts to serve in an advising capacity and to encourage students to meet with them after class hours.

Participants who completed a summer program and then enrolled at a four-year institution were also asked to reflect on their experiences with faculty and staff. In response, they shared similar stories about sometimes utilizing email rather than direct face-to-face interactions, and also highlighted strategies the university and faculty had orchestrated to encourage attendance at office hours. However, college access program participants also spoke about seeking additional help from faculty in the form of reviewing drafts or assignments prior to the student submitted them as well as seeking clarification on upcoming assignments. Kristen described her experience meeting with faculty after class:

> I would meet my math professor and my English professor outside of class because I would need …. clarification on what was due, or if I wanted to get my work checked ahead of time before I handed it in, I would meet with them face-to-face. But most of the time, I would do it through email. I would send them my work in a document and just have them look it over before I submitted it. And for an essay, I would just have them read it over and just tell me what they think I should fix or just anything like that. I never really … utilized their office hours as

much as probably I should've or other students probably did, but I still felt like I was on top of my work and I did okay.

Margaret's interactions with faculty were similar to Kristen's as she often sought their counsel when struggling with an assignment:

> I didn't really meet with my class faculty people too much outside of actual classes. Mainly, I would send them emails. I'd be like, "Hey, what do you think about this paper?" I would say the professor I met with the most was probably for my statistics class just because I'm not strong academically in math. So I needed the extra help.

Participants who completed the DSP summer program at UMass Boston shared similar stories of working closely with faculty on assignments outside the classroom. The DSP program focused primarily on developing strong writing skills and teaching students how to analyze readings beyond surface-level meaning. This focus left an impression on the students, encouraging them to seek additional faculty help on writing assignments specifically; this evolved into receiving additional faculty support around other academic issues. Yarelis, for instance, described the support Mike, a faculty member, had provided:

> He was my professor last semester. I'd go to see him mostly every day, to be honest. Every time I'm confused about my writing or if I have any type of academic issues, I would just go and talk to him. He's very helpful.

Mary shared a similar experience with her professor at UMass Boston:

> Well, I remember last semester with Kyton for a seminar, I met with him frequently because his essays were a bit much. But like every other week, I would meet with him and he would go through each paragraph with me and it was very

helpful doing that.

Beyond requesting faculty feedback on assignments, college access participants also described their formal and informal interactions with faculty. Some of these encounters might occur in the hallway or in the cafeteria; others were deliberate, resulting from the requirements that had been built into specific courses, similar to the experiences community college attendees described.

Skylar developed a rapport with her faculty that began informally, with her arriving early for class and waiting outside the classroom with her professors:

> Because I would get there early, my teachers would actually be waiting outside the classroom, so we would wait together and actually have discussions and talks or—they would just talk to me as if I was their own friend. My teacher for my history of education class, we would wait outside the classroom, and I was always there early, so we would always have conversations. And I think because of these, even small conversations, that I would just say hi or just be interested, she would talk to me more during class as well. So … I think it helped out overall for me.

Later in the focus group, Skylar described similar informal meetings with professors, highlighting her increasing comfort interacting with professors:

> But I encounter lots of faculty. When I'm walking to my classes I always see them, or when I go to the cafeteria they're always there, because that's where they get their food. So yeah, they ask me how I'm doing. I tell them I'm doing good. They ask me about the semester. So since it is a small campus, you do run into at least somebody at least once a day, or once a week or something.

Jeanette, a college access program participant, developed stronger bonds with her faculty than other students but recalled those relationships beginning in a similar manner as Skylar, through informal interactions:

> I talked to all of my teachers actually. I would stay after class and talk to them, even if it wasn't about the work, I would talk to them about their day. My one teacher, I remember her. I remember my psychology course, child development. She was telling us about this thing about children and how they have these behavioral issues, and I stayed after class and was explaining how I think my sister, there's something wrong with her. And we had this long conversation for about 30 minutes about … psychology and stuff and about my assignment.

Later in the focus group, Jeanette commented on relationships had built with her professors:

> It was really good. All my teachers I had a connection with. When they take attendance, even now, they take attendance and they're like, "Oh, Brianna's here. I saw her walk in." They know my name. Which is a benefit of a school being so small and the classroom space.

Carol's interactions with faculty were less casual and generally compulsary, required by specific Rowan course syllabi. This experience was similar to that described by community college attendees but even more intentional. In addition to being part of the syllabus, there were actual class days when students were required to meet with faculty instead of attending class. Carol described these encounters:

> I really met with faculty outside of the classroom … during mandatory meetings. We had days where we didn't have class and instead we would go in, meet with

> the professors during their office hours, and that would count as our attendance for the class to go over projects, or our work, or our tests. So that was really the only time that I really utilized their office hours, but it was mandatory.

When asked for clarification about the mandatory meetings (to determine whether they were university requirements imposed on first-year students or course requirements), Margaret offered the following response:

> Mine was a communication class, and it would be like, "Class is canceled, but you have to schedule a one-on-one with the teacher to review your thesis or your preliminary paper." And I kind of have the same thing this semester, where it's like, "Class is canceled, but you need to meet with your professor and go over your senior thesis," sort of thing, but I don't have scheduled one-on-one meetings in my own personal time.

The support that college access program recipients sought from faculty—review of papers prior to their due date or clarification on assignments—was unique to this group; similar accounts were not shared by the community college students. College access program participants also spoke more frequently of informal interactions with faculty between classes or in common spaces. Some of this may be attributable to Rowan and UMass Boston having more full-time students and a greater sense of community. As a result, college access program students were more likely to interact with a professor outside of class. Also, the summer programs both encouraged students to leverage faculty for assistance and focused on building stronger writing skills.

Participants at both UMass Boston and Rowan University discussed at length consistent, ongoing conversations they had with staff and faculty whom they had met

during the summer. Beltray, Kiara, and Mustafa all specifically mentioned Polly and Mike, staff they first met during their participation in the summer program at UMass Boston and whom they continued to seek out for support. Jessica, when asked to identify any faculty or staff she had met with, best summarized how the relationship developed and matured during the first year of college:

> Polly and Mike. I think that the DSP program kind of created connections between the students and the staff because almost all the students who showed up after the programs ended—we all kind of go to these two people almost all the time because that connection stays and there's a relationship that it created between us. So when I have a question that I need to be answered or when I don't understand something, I just go to them. There are two people that I really go to almost every day.

Kiara named Polly and Mike specifically, and made it clear that she would speak with them about almost anything:

> I still meet with Polly and Mike. Mike was my professor through DSP, but I would just stop by and say hi—and [if] I [had] new ideas, anything I would like to talk about, the press, see something in the school that's impressive, not impressive, I would just go and talk to them.

Mustafa also mentioned Polly and Mike specifically:

> I met with Polly and Mike. I did meet with my other professors but it was kind of to say, "I need help with one of the readings," and I would … just call them or talk with [them] and sometimes they helped me.

Not all of the participants named specific staff or administrators, though they did credit the summer program for introducing key services available at the university. Yarelis explained how the summer program helped her identify and take advantage of student resources on campus:

> I'm not going to lie, it was a little bit hard, but at least DSP helped me how to find ways to—like tutoring. DSP helped me to not make myself—if I need help, just ask for it because that's why people are here, to help you. And so yeah, it just kind of prepared me a lot.

Carol admitted to facing challenges during her first year in college. Although she felt the summer program's structure did not mirror what she experienced during her first semester, she gained other valuable lessons from the program:

> My freshman year, I definitely struggled. It was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be. I was extremely used to the structure of PCI [and] was not prepared for how college was actually going to be. But even though it didn't prepare me for it—it kind of gave me a false sense of what college was actually going to be like—it did give me a lot of resources that I was able to use, such as the Tutoring Center, the EOF office, the Academic Advising Center, the Academic Success Center, the Wellness Center…. And I would say that even though it wasn't really my strongest year and I didn't do as well as I hoped I would, it definitely set me up with the resources that I needed to be able to do better my following year and the following semester.

Overall, Kristen was satisfied with her performance during her first year in college and believed her success was attributable to the resources she was introduced to

during the summer program at Rowan and the support she received from the EOF office staff:

> For me, it actually … went pretty well. Of course … the workload was a little bit different than high school. So that took a couple of weeks to get used to. But with having knowing people in Savitz [Hall, the EOF office location] who could help me get—I did not know where to order my books, how to order my books; I didn't know what "Rowan Bucks" were or anything like that—having this kind of net to fall back on in Savitz in the EOF office, it … helped me with my freshman year, and it kind of just guided me really well. My freshman year probably would've been a lot rougher if it wasn't for knowing those people and knowing my resources because they introduced me to so many resources around campus I never even knew was there. And they just really helped me out. It would've been hard freshman year. I would've probably not done well in my classes if it wasn't for having that stability there.

Margaret credited the summer program with opening her eyes to the possibility of graduating early. Before having a conversation with an advisor during the summer program, Margaret assumed she would be at Rowan for four years before pursing graduate work. An advisor from the summer program challenged her to rethink that plan:

> I think that the only thing I really got from the Pre-College Institute was my determination to finish the program [i.e., college] early. So I feel like, once again, since I had so much free time, I had this lackadaisical attitude towards my academics. And I was like, "Oh, yeah, I'll be here for four years. It's whatever." And I'm like, "I'll go to law school and I'll get my PhD. It'll be fine." And I came

> in with a lot of credits. And one of the advisers during PCI was like, "If you can graduate and get out of here early and save money, why wouldn't you?" And I was thinking about it, and then the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. So then I brought it up with my academic advisers, and we came up with a master plan. And she was like, "Yeah, if you really want to, you can graduate in two years." And I was like—so, now, I'm going to be done this year, and it's actually really awesome…. I would say that that's what the program did for me. It pushed me to excel academically, just push myself.

Margaret performed well in college and indicated that she did not need the additional academic support that other college access program participants needed. She stated earlier that she had received limited support from faculty and met with them during mandatory office times only. However, her last statement showed that despite not needing the academic support, she did receive guidance that put her on a path to graduate early.

Experience Using Online Registration Systems

As mentioned previously, community college attendees discussed the role that faculty had played in providing advising support, including assistance with registration. During focus groups and interviews, several community college attendees also shared their experience using the institutions' online systems and curriculum planning sheets to determine, without the aid of staff, which courses they needed to take. Participants who attended a community college had very positive experiences following course plans to register for upcoming semesters. The participants who completed the summer college program and enrolled at a four-year college did not use this same language in explaining

the registration process and appeared from their comments to rely more heavily on the support of advisors.

Daisy, a community college attendee, was asked during her follow-up interview to talk about any meetings she had had with staff or faculty outside the classroom. She mentioned a meeting with her advisor, and when asked to elaborate on how often she had met with her advisor and for what purpose, she commented:

> I've only met with my academic advisor to discuss classes. I didn't meet with her this semester because I already had my requirements printed out, so I knew what classes to take.

Frank, who also attended a community college, was able to access all of the information he needed to register. After Frank shared that he had not met with an advisor and did not know who his advisor was, he shared that he was able to register for classes online: "Oh, everything is online…. And there's a course—no, a curriculum, I guess. You can just look at it online and what classes you need to take.

Dina, who had not been assigned an advisor but had received offers from her professors to assist with registration, commended her community college for providing a system that was so easy to navigate:

> Everything goes pretty smooth. I do most of my stuff online. So yeah, it's pretty cool. I learned how to schedule my classes online and stuff by myself. And I can look up the course catalog, and it's just really easy.

Jocelyn, a community college attendee, shared a similar sentiment. She was able to register successfully for classes without the assistance of faculty or staff. When asked how she knew which courses to take, she stated:

> It was pretty easy to get through at [In-State Community College]. When I applied and put my major in, they gave me a list of recommended classes that I should take, and I just made my schedule off that list.

Reliance on an easy-to-navigate online system was a theme unique to the community college attendees. Daisy, Frank, Dina, and Jocelyn were all able to register for classes through user-friendly online tools. Although the college access program participants may have had access to similar tools, they seemed more dependent on staff and faculty to help complete the same tasks.

Campus Connections and Engagement

Toward the conclusion of the focus groups, both community college attendees and college access program participants were asked to discuss their involvement in campus extracurricular activities. Participants were asked to describe any events they had attended and/or activities they had participated in, and to reflect on experiences they had with peers outside the classroom. The questions during this portion of the focus group were deliberately kept broad to capture experiences students may have been engaged in outside the academic realm, including sports, student clubs, activities, work on campus, or events. The goal during this section of the focus group was to understand the participants' connections with their institutions and to investigate the degree to which they were engaged with their colleges beyond academic purposes.

During this section of the focus group, the conversations garnered very different responses from community college attendees and those who had participated in college access programs prior to enrolling in a four-year college. Specifically, the degree to

which community college attendees were engaged in activities outside the classroom was limited.

Frank, a first-generation community college attendee, shared that he had been part of the math club and the innovation club, and also a member of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. Of all the community college students, Frank was the most active on campus and credited the community college with not only helping him become involved but also preparing him to pursue a four-year college: "[Community College] helped me to get prepared for college, more like a four-year institute, I guess. I've become more, I guess, involved. Because during high school, I really wasn't involved in clubs or anything like that." Frank also spoke of his involvement in the Garden State Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (GSLSAMP) program, which is funded by the National Science Foundation and aims to increase the number of minority professionals pursuing careers in STEM fields. Frank described his experience with this program:

> So it's this program for minorities in, of course, STEM-related fields. So I basically did—I did an internship with them, and I did research over the summer, this current summer…. I don't know if that's school-related. It's founded by the NSF grant.

When pressed about how he became involved in the GSLSAMP program, Frank shared, "Well, my physics professor, she was the coordinator for the Essex County College of the LSAMP. I had her, so she was just telling us about it."

Despite being the most actively engaged community college student in the focus groups, Frank still expressed concerns about the number of activities available at his

school: “So what I certainly like is that it's small. Yeah, what it gets me. There's not a lot of things to do out there. I usually just go, mind my own business, just go to the class.”

Henry also spoke positively of his community college experience, and although he wished the community college he attended had more sports programs, he had become involved with the Asian club and the music club, and also utilized the gym on campus. He was particularly impressed with the students he met: “I met a lot of international students in community college that are really smart. I’ve never thought about that: I can meet this many people who came to America.”

Other community college attendees reported only limited involvement in campus activities. Daisy, for instance, reported being part of the honor society, and C.J. played basketball for a semester but then stopped. C.J. praised the faculty at his community college but was critical of the level of non-academic activities offered on campus: “The professors, they were down-to-earth. They're understanding. I like that. What I didn't like—there's not much to do. Just community college, that's about it.”

Aside from Jocelyn, who worked in the health department on campus, the community college attendees did not report any engagement in activities or with peers outside the classroom. A recurring theme among the group was the need to work, which was best summed up by Jonathan in his response to the question regarding his involvement on campus: “I work full time. I don't have time.”

From concerns about the lack of activities on campus to time restrictions due to jobs, community college student participants described less engagement with peers outside of class. When describing their time at the community college, they associated

their experiences with taking classes, not engaging in activities tied to the campus community.

College access program participants credited the summer program for creating connections with not only staff and faculty but also peers. Several college access participants referred to the bonds they established with peers during the summer and described how those bonds manifested during their first year. The development of peer connections and the benefit of being on campus prior to the start of the semester led to greater involvement in campus activities. Carol described the connections she made during the summer and maintained during the first year:

> I do keep in contact with some of the students that I've met. Not all of them as much as I would have hoped for. But some of them, I do. I still talk to them every now and again. Whenever we have class meetings, we meet up beforehand. We catch up. We sit at the class meeting and hang out for a little while after.

Similarly, Margaret shared that she recognized the faces of her summer-program peers around campus and within student organizations:

> I feel like I've maintained a certain level of contact with the people that I became friends with during PCI. And there's definitely people that fell off…. But for the most part, I feel like—including the peer mentors that did my PCI. If I see them around, they'll say hi, or I can text them about anything. And some of them are in the same organization as me.

The level of contact Margaret had with the peers and mentors whom she had met in the PCI program was not unique. For some, the summer program helped make the fall

semester feel less intimidating because they saw familiar faces on campus. Kristen credited the summer program with helping her meet her roommate and close friend:

> Actually, I met one of my—freshman year, I met my roommate from PCI. Her name is Katie, and I lived with her all freshman year. We're actually living together again this semester. So I met one of my really good friends from PCI.

One specific aspect of the summer program at Rowan included the creation of small groups to help students become more comfortable with eachother and to provide opportuntites to have discussions in a more intimate setting. Program participants, including Skylar, credited this aspect of the program with helping to create a closer bond among peers: “Well, through that small group I met a lot of friends that I stayed in contact with throughout my semester, and they actually—I started with these people. I went to the library with these people.”

The range of activities that summer college-access participants reported being involved in included community service, religious and cultural associations, sports, academic organizations, social organizations, and tutoring/mentoring. Mustafa, who visited UMass Boston while in high school to see an annual event hosted by the Somali organization on campus, spoke of his involvement with the group:

> I talked about it when you asked if I came to the school before. I talked about the Somali community and doing the party and kind of doing cultural stuff. Actually, I am doing it right now, I am in the group and kind of doing the same thing they were doing the year before. I think it's April 29—its cultural day, everybody presents his culture, through dance or something. So I'm doing a sitcom this year. Yeah, it's cool.

Kiara shared an experience similar to Mustafa's; she was part of two different affinity groups as well as a mentoring group at UMass Boston:

> So, similar to what Mustafa talked about, I'm also part of the Arab and Muslim Student Associations. They're different associations, but I will be participating in cultural days and things like that. And I'm also going to be participating in Sociology 444, which is peer mentors for seminar class.

Jessica and Yarelis both talked about their experiences conducting community service at local institutions as part of an English course. They were encouraged to take the course by DSP staff, and a requirement of the course was to perform 40 hours of community service in a tutoring center for non-English speakers.

Finally, Ryan shared her involvement with the varsity basketball team. Despite being sidelined that year with an injury, she was proud to be part of the team: "I'm on the basketball team. I just didn't play this season because I told you I got surgery, but if you go on the website you'll see my face."

Participants in the summer program at Rowan shared a similar level of engagement in campus activities. Skylar had been involved in a variety of community service projects and on-campus clubs:

> I did a lot of volunteer work. I actually volunteered at the Pennsauken Breast Cancer Walk. I think it was through EOF, too. You were able to sign up and they provided a shuttle for you, and they actually took you there. And we were there all day, and it was during fall so it was really cold out. It started at 7:00 a.m. and ran until 1:00 p.m. I also did Junior Achievement, and that's when you get assigned an elementary school around the area and you go and teach for a whole

day, and they give you a little—they give you everything to prepare you. Your lesson plan is already in the booklet. If you want to give out any treats or any little stuff for the kids, it's in there. I did that, and I'm doing that again too this Friday. And then I also was part of the elementary education club. Oh, I did homecoming as well. The homecoming banner. I actually participated in the EOF banner. So that was fun, too.

Jeanette's involvement included many of the same activities, but she was also engaged in a professional organization associated with her program of study:

Last year I joined PRSA. It's for … my major, for public relations. It's called Public Relations Student Association. And I also mentor high school students as part of a mentoring program. I mentor high school students once a week. I'm a peer mentor now, so I mentor a college freshman. And I also helped with the banner, the homecoming banner. And I worked a lot.

Margaret described her first semester as a "disaster," requiring her to make adjustments for the second semester. Although she was successful academically, she was not nearly as engaged in college as she had been in high school and did not feel positive about her experience:

I felt like my freshman year—well, I felt my first semester was kind of a disaster. Maybe not academically—my transcript does not reflect that—but I felt like emotionally, mentally my first semester was a disaster because I just had way too much free time. I came into college having worked, played two sports, did marching band, and was on the debate team. So I was used to having a full schedule. And then when I came here, I had nothing. I didn't have a job. I had a

> higher course load than most students, but I didn't have any extracurricular [activities]. I wasn't on any sport teams. So I was taking two, three naps a day not because I was depressed but just because I had to fill time because I had literally nothing else to do but watch Netflix and go to sleep.

However, during the second semester, Margaret made the conscious decision to become more involved on campus:

> So I basically decided that wasn't working for me. And second semester, I … transferred. Because I worked at Victoria Secret, so I transferred from my store at home to this one. I got involved on campus. I ran for executive positions in honor's society. Got more involved. And I started to feel better. I was more engaged in my classes. My grades kind of—I felt like my first semester was definitely a learning experience for me. And I feel like there's different strokes for different folks. Because for some people, they can't do anything but really focus on school. But if I don't have a full schedule, then I feel like nothing gets done.

Later in the focus group, Margaret went on to share that she became vice president of the honor society, took swimming lessons, and became involved in the Residential Housing Association (RHA). When asked to reflect on her increased engagement on campus and whether it was self-initiated or if it was stimulated by advice she had received during the summer or first semester, she took credit for making the shift herself but also revealed that she had leveraged some of the individuals she met during the summer college-access program:

> I feel like it was my own desire, but I gravitated towards individuals that I met in the summer program. And actually, for RHA, for example, the president of our

> organization came from the PCI class before me. So it was encouraging because I see a lot of the leadership positions on campus being filled by PCI students, whether they're part of my class or previous classes. So I think having that networking system already in place just because when you say, "Oh, I'm PCI too," there is connection because they went through the same summer struggles as you. It's something familiar.

Like Margaret, many of the four-year college student participants often juggled many commitments, and working was a necessity. Kristen admitted to being more involved in high school but felt that she needed to focus more on her studies in college:

> I would like to be more involved on campus. I admit that I'm not that involved on campus because, unlike Margaret—I don't know why I'm like this—but I can only focus on class. I could never manage having as much on my plate as her. I'm the type of person that's like, "School, school, school." And I also work. I have a job too and I work on the weekends. But if during the week I knew I had—if I was a vice president of a club and I knew I had to manage all my school work on top of managing a club or doing a sport, I don't really know how people do that.

Collectively, the summer college-access program participants conveyed a deeper level of on-campus engagement than the community college students and described how their introduction to peers and mentors during the summer developed into more meaningful relationships. For one college access program participant, the summer program led to her meeting her roommate. Another indicated that seeing the peer mentors leading organizations on campus helped her feel more comfortable getting involved. College access program participants described recognizing familiar faces from

the summer program, an experience that help strengthen the group's bond. Many credited the small groups developed during the summer program with helping the college access students get to know, and grow close to, a small cohort of students. College access program participants who were less involved in activities, like Kristen, had consciously decided to focus more on schoolwork but still recognized the availability of activities on campus.

Experience in Community College

At the conclusion of the focus group, participants were asked to reflect on their first year in college and to share their future plans. College access program participants were asked specifically to reflect on their experience in the summer program and to discuss any benefits they had realized as a result of completing the program as they related to their first year in college.

Community College attendees shared positive impressions of their experience and indicated that they felt more comfortable with the idea of college after enrolling in a two-year college. Daisy credited the community college with easing her fear of higher education and described the benefits this way: "Just getting used to college. I was kind of scared about getting used to college and having to live away from home at the same time."

Frank credited the community college with helping to coax him out of his shell. He was not particularly active in high school, but that changed when he attended the community college. When asked to explain how he had benefited from attending the community college, he said, "It helped me to get prepared for college, more like four-

year institute, I guess. I've become more … involved. Because during high school, I really wasn't involved in clubs or anything like that.'

C.J. shared that he had only attended one semester at the community college and then withdrew for a semester to address an injury. When asked if he felt he had benefited from the semester at the community college, he responded, "Kind of. And, I guess [it] helped me balance time…. Because it's way different than high school."

Jocelyn also spoke positively of her experience at the community college and felt it specifically prepared her for the next step:

> So now I kind of know what to expect more because I'm pretty sure it's like the same exact thing [except for a different school]. So yeah, I feel like I'm more prepared this time.

This perception, however, was not shared by all of the community college attendees. Although Jonathan and Henry spoke positively of their overall experiences at the community college, they still had lingering doubts as to the academic preparation they had received and whether it would be sufficient for their next step. Jonathan credited the community college with providing a better understanding of how to navigate college but was not yet confident in his ability to succeed as a college student:

> I think I feel more prepared in terms of, like, the logistical side. In terms of, like, applying and going through registration for classes. I don't know. I still feel kind of lost as a student, so maybe not as a student.

Jonathan was enrolled in nine credits and also worked full-time outside of college, which limited his connection to campus and seemed to contribute to his uncertainty about college. Additionaly, he wished he had put more attention into earning stronger grades in

high school and focused more on financial aid and scholarships. All of these emotions and apprehensions left him him feeling a bit uncertain about college.

Henry's concerns about the academic preparation he received while enrolled in a community college stemmed in part from messages he had received from other students about perceived difference in academic rigor between two-year and four-year colleges:

> I feel like [In-State Community College] was kind of easy. Because some people told me that four-year colleges are harder than a community college, so I'm not sure what's going to change after I transfer.

Many community college attendees focused primarily on the idea of transferring and determining their next step. Most of the community college students remained committed to meeting their educational goals and were comforted by the presence of so many students who were engaged in a similar transfer process. Although they felt uncertain in some cases about which institution to attend and or how long they would stay at the community college, the participants remained steadfast in their goal to receive a bachelor's degree. Two community college students specified their intention to complete their before transferring. Four participants were interested in transferring prior to the completion of an associate degree. The uncertainty around next steps varied based on personal circumstances and external factors.

Jonathan planned to complete his associate degree and to eventually pursue his baccalaureate degree, but his status as an undocumented student made the path forward relatively unclear:

> Again, especially being undocumented, like with my aunt trying to figure it out, I'm not exactly sure where I'm going to end up, but I did go with the idea of, like,

I'll go to community college and then transfer out once I'm done.

Similar to Jonathan's, Frank's timeline for transferring to a four-year college was contingent on funding options. Frank had his sights set on attending a four-year college, and when asked if he would complete his associate degree first, he was upfront about the timing being dependent on a scholarship for which he had applied:

> Well, it depends. Because right now, I applied to the scholarship, and then if I get it, I need to have my associate's in order to obtain it. But if I don't, then I'll probably just transfer. I already applied to the school that I want to go to, but just in case.

C.J. and Dina also planned to transfer to a four-year college before completing their associate degree. Although the exact school was unknown, C.J. was considering a move to an in-state public university, and Dina expressed interest in moving to Florida.

Likewise, Jocelyn did not plan to complete her associate degree and thought she would make the move to a four-year college after attending the community college for a year. She had already contacted the transfer team at UMass Boston in an effort to understand the process. She described her situation this way:

> So my main goal going in there was to transfer basically because going to [In-State Community College] was literally a very last-minute decision. I was supposed to go to a four-year school but something happened. So yeah, just ending up—I think at [In-State Community College] my main goal was to go here, get my credits, and then transfer back to a four-year school.

Jocelyn did not feel she was alone in the transfer process; she described deriving a sense of comfort from so many other students around her experiencing a similar process:

> I kind of like that there was a lot of people who were trying to go to the transferring process. So talking to people, you can kind of relate to what they're going through, all your friends who are already in a four-year school.

With the exception of one student, the college access program participants enrolled in a four-year college did not exist the same uncertainty about next steps. Aside from Jeanette, the college access program participants did not indicate they had any plans to transfer to another institution. Jeanette's plans were unclear, since she had concerns about the amount of time she spent commuting to work, which was a necessity for her to pay her bills:

> I don't know, because I like Rowan. I really do. But … I commute four times a week home to work. I work at Wells Fargo, and it's hard because it's an hour and a half away, and I do that Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and Saturdays. So it's starting to become a lot. I'm starting to be—I just started working there in August, so I am 30 minutes late to each class every week. And it's starting to become really hard academically and stuff. So I don't know. I was going to transfer to [In-State Public College], but I don't like the campus so I don't think I'm going to transfer.

Experience in the Summer College-Access Program

As described earlier in the chapter, participants shared accounts of their first-year experience and alluded to the indirect benefits they had received from completing the summer college-access program. However, in direct response to questions about program activities they had completed and how those activities helped shape their college experience, a pattern of benefits emerged from participant responses.

Developing Strong Reading and Writing Skills

At their core, both the DSP and PCI programs focused on building academic skills and preparing students for their upcoming fall-semester classes. Most evident was the emphasis each program placed on building strong reading and writing skills.

In describing the program, Mary acknowledged both the awkwardness of sitting in a class with students she did not know and also the emphasis on writing:

> There was a lot of writing for one. A lot. But after a week or two, everybody started talking, because it was kind of awkward the first week. Everyone was just staring at each other. But it was cool and we bounced ideas off each other and then it went smoothly after the third week.

Mary went on to detail how her writing improved as a result of, for example, learning how to cite sources: "So as far as the writing assignments, … my professor helped me cite our sources and our writing and works cited." Jeanette provided a broader perspective on how her professor in the summer program helped her to improve her writing and attributed that experience to her geting into a higher level writing course when she began her freshman year at Rowan:

> My professor was really nice. She helped me a lot as a writer. I learned a lot about what type of writer I was. Because [transitioning] from high school writing to college is hard—well, difficult. And basically she helped me, and when I got into college and I took ICC-1, I actually did good. I got an A in it.

Jessica echoed Jeanette and Mary's sentiments and acknowledged a rapid improvement in her writing as a result of the summer program:

> Just like Mary said, the work was a bit heavy and challenging, but one of the things I really loved about it is how I kind of saw a big change in how I write. I can see there was a big difference. One time I just looked at it and I was like, "Did I really write this?" Because, like I said, it was really different from high school, and I was like, "Oh, my God, I can't believe it." So that was a really good thing for me, and I kind of kept it with me because it changed me and I see this program in a different perspective from when I first got the letter because I didn't want to come, but then when I got here I realized that it was helpful to me, it was … in my best interest.

Yarelis also felt the program helped prepare her and, specifically, strengthen her writing skills:

> I really think it did prepare me. I'm the type of person that I write a lot and when I'm writing, I'm very general. I'm not a very specific person. But it kind of got me to find ways and strategies, skills to make my writing stronger.

The participants' experiences demonstrated the emphasis both programs placed on developing students' writing ability. Mary, Jeanette, Jessica, and Yarelis all gained writing confidence from the time spent in the summer program and carried this confidence with them into their first year in college. They expressed pride in reading something they had written and feeling confident about it, and also were surprised to receive strong grades in writing courses in the fall semester.

In addition to writing, participants also shared anecdotes about the emphasis the summer program put on critical reading. Both Yarelis and Mustafa felt that the program had improved their ability to read critically. Yarelis recognized that the selected readings

reinforced the theme of the program, which centered on integrity and compassion, and helped her to think more empathically about others:

> Something that I can recall—and I really remember and will remember forever—is values such as integrity and compassion. I got to read a couple books that make me realize that sometimes you have to put yourself in somebody's situation and think not about yourself but others.

Mustafa also mentioned that the summer program required him to read more critically and helped him develop skills that he used later in his college career:

> We had to read a lot. I used to read different when I was in high school but when it comes to DSP, reading felt very different. I used to read in a certain way, but when I came in DSP, reading kind of felt different. I had to look differently. I had to look at different options like what kind of ideas, like how many ideas in this paragraph, all that. And that really helped with me moving forward in my college career. Right now, I read a lot of really hard text and if I didn't do that, it would be hard for me to do it going forward.

Beyond improvements in reading and writing, participants who completed the summer program mentioned making connections, building time-management skills, and becoming familiar with the expectations of college-level work, which collectively increased their level of confidence when transitioning to college.

Making Connections

Kristen recalled feeling somewhat shy beforehand, but the summer program helped introduce her to a small group of students whose faces became familiar during her first year in college:

> I feel like that program, it did encourage me more to get out of my shell because when … the actual semester started and there was all the other freshman here, we sort of had—I had that sense of knowing people again, and feeling like I kind of was back at home, and it wasn't like I was walking around not knowing anyone. So I knew older people. And I knew the people I was living with. And it kind of just made me comfortable with where I was, and my environment, and myself. So it made me introduce myself to more people. So, overall, it was a really helpful experience.

In addition to commenting on forming relationships with peers, Kristen reflected on familiar faces from the college access program office as well as mentors she had met:

> I knew some of the staff. If I went to Savitz [Hall], I knew some of the staff. And some of the mentors that were for PCI, I would see them around campus. And they were one to two years older than us, and so I knew them.

Jeanette also described herself as shy, but a dance course she took during the summer program helped her overcome the anxiety of meeting new people:

> I had to make up my own dance, and I'm very shy. I'm very shy. So it helped me break out of my shyness and figure out who I am, I guess. It also helped my confidence a lot. I had to dance in front of people that I've only [barely] knew and it helped me build relationships with them. So, it was very cool.

Carol shared the connection she built with her EOF advisor and peers during the college access program and how it continued when she began at Rowan:

> Staff members that I really keep in contact with is my EOF adviser, only because the other staff that I was close to don't actually work at Rowan—they were just

part of the PCI program [summer staff only]. So I wasn't able to really keep in contact with them. So the only one who I really keep [in] contact with is my EOF adviser and the other EOF advisers that work on campus. And I do keep in contact with some of the students that I've met. Not all of them as much as I would have hoped for. But some of them I do. I still talk to them every now and again. Whenever we have class meetings, we meet up beforehand. We catch up. We sit at the class meeting and hang out for a little while after.

The connections Skylar built with her peers was a result of small group assignments. Skylar expressed that the size of the group created a more intimate environment to share perspectives:

I remember the small groups. We had small groups, and we would talk about—anything that was in that room that we talked about would stay in that room, and a lot of people opened up. And I thought it was a great way to get to know everybody. But your group, your group only. I think it was only like 13 students per small group. Yeah, I really enjoyed that part of EOF.

Although, in general, the experiences participants shared were positive, Margaret did not initially perceive value in the support of staff from the summer program during her first year in college and has only recently found it benefitial to access their services:

And then in terms of faculty, I actually didn't get in contact with the EOF office my freshman year at all just because I felt like they were [laughter]—I felt like they were useless, to be quite honest with you. I just felt like they were not doing anything for me, and it wasn't—I felt like it was a waste of my time to contact them. They're much more helpful this year because they want to pay for things

> for me [laughter]. They're willing to pay for my grad school applications and my GRE exam…. We're forced to maintain contact with our counselors, but I will tell you, I skipped or rescheduled every single meeting last semester…. But this semester, I've actually gone to the meetings.

Regardless of how or when participants began accessing the network they developed in the summer, the stories shared by participants outlined a clear pattern. Summer program participants formed relationships with program staff, faculty, and peers who were available for leveraging during their first year in college.

Time-Management Skills

Consistent with the emphasis placed on developing reading and writing skills, the programs at both UMass Boston and Rowan also concentrated on developing students' time-management skills. Participants shared many accounts of how their respective programs either stressed time management or structured the program in a manner in which effective time management was necessary. Although participants' reactions varied regarding the degree to which the structure in the summer program helped them to understand college expectations (i.e., some felt that it was over-structured and did not replicate what they experienced in the fall), they all received a clear message that managing time well in college was imperative. The confidence they developed in their reading and writing skills was also evident in the strategies they developed to manage their time effectively.

Jeanette described arriving 15 minutes early to all of her classes, which stemmed from a practice she had established during the summer program at Rowan:

> I think that it helped me because they had us on a really tight schedule, so it helped me prepare. Like first semester, I was early to all my classes, because I was so used to the EOF schedule of being there 15 minutes early, and they wanted us bright and early. So I was used to waking up and stuff like that, because I did it all summer. I think it helped me a lot.

Similarly, the time-management skills Jessica developed during the summer program at UMass Boston resulted from her having class four days a week and having to keep up with assignments that were due the next morning regardless of her work schedule:

> One of the things that DSP really helped me with is time management because having all of [this] homework every single night, so you have to know how to manage your time because you have class every day except for Friday and you have to get the work done during the night, and even if you're working you have to get it done for the next day. And that was something that I was not really involved in when I was in high school because I didn't have that much homework. So when I go to work and I know I have to stay up to like 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, 11:00, whatever time it is and try to manage my time. So when I came here in the fall, I have all these classes and they are college-level classes, so I have an idea of how to split time for my classes.

In Margaret's opinion, the structure of the summer program felt unnatural and did not ultimately reflect her college experience; however, her comments revealed a consistent effort on the part of the summer program staff to introduce students to academic life:

> I remember feeling that it was too structured. I felt like the amount of structure provided in the program was probably great for maybe transitioning students into it but would be detrimental during the actual school year because you wouldn't have that level of structure being imposed on you by some sort of authority figure. So I feel like it made it hard for students that should've really gotten, I guess, a college experience, or they should've really gotten time to know how to structure schedules themselves.

Carol agreed with Margaret about the structure of the program but also acknowledged that the program had assisted in her transition:

> I do agree with Margaret on that. It was very structured, and that wasn't really going to help with the college experience because that's not what you're going to get when you go to college. And sorry. So I do agree with her on that, but they did help a lot with how structured it was, and getting used to your classes, helping you through transitioning.

The structure introduced during the summer program may have been an attempt by college access program staff to give students strategies for organizing their day in order to succeed in an environment that was more unstructured than they were typically accustomed to. Margaret may have been too close to her own college experience at that time or perhaps had not had enough time to fully reflect on how beneficial the time-management skills she had developed in the summer were to her freshman year. Carol seemed to be able to draw on the structured nature of the summer program to establish a rhythm with her classes.

Expectations of College-Level Work

Key to the structure that students experienced during the summer program was the introduction of coursework and content that would be covered during their first year in college. Participants credited the program with helping them understand the expectations of college-level work and reducing anxieties associated with transitioning to a new academic environment and rigor.

Skylar felt as if she had never left the summer program when she started at Rowan, having already covered much of the content presented in the fall:

> I think EOF really helped me with the whole transitioning, because when the semester started, it was like as if I never left. All the knowledge and everything that I knew was still up in here, and everything was still fresh. And a lot of my friends had to go over review for the first couples of weeks, because they couldn't remember what they learned last year or they couldn't remember if they ever did. So I knew I did, because everything that they were telling me in class I was already told through EOF, but several times.

Jeanette's comfort level was more associated with understanding the campus and not feeling anxious about locating classes in the fall. She completed the summer program at Rowan with a high grade, which gave her confidence going into the fall:

> It was very useful that I spent the whole summer there, because I knew where all my classes were…. I finished my first semester with a 3.5. I started already with an A from the summer course, so that actually helped me.

Beltray's experience in the summer program at UMass Boston provided a similar comfort level, which he associated with understanding the expectations his professors

would have in the fall: "So in many of my other classes, when I step in, I feel like I know what I'm doing and I know what is expected, and I think that kind of helped me."

Mustafa used very similar terminology to describe the way the summer program was structured and how it introduced him to the expectations of college-level work while providing an overview of some of the content he would face in his fall classes:

> So I kind of felt like the DSP program was like a college class. It was nice the way it was constructed. And you get to learn what … to expect from the teachers and from your professors, and when you go to real class in the fall, you won't feel new to the idea. You won't find anything—you won't feel like thrown in, like, "Oh, I don't know what's going on." So you have an idea of what you need to do instead of writings, readings, all kinds of stuff.

Yarelis' comfort with her fall courses stemmed from having the same teacher in the summer program as she had in the fall. Although she acknowledged that the coursework was challenging, she had become comfortable with the professors' expectations and knew how to ask for help:

> I got used to it, I got used to the structure of college label writing. So I was not surprised. I'm not going to lie, it was a little bit hard, but at least DSP helped me how to find ways to—like tutoring. DSP helped me to ask— if I need help, just ask for it because that's why people are here, to help.

Participants's descriptions of the skills they had developed during the summer programs at Rowan and UMass Boston were very similar. The programs' focus on developing strong reading and writing skills, introducing students to college-level work,

and exposing them to support services improved their transition and eased some of the anxiety typically faced during the first year in college.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter begins with a summary of the study, followed by a discussion of the findings organized by the two research questions, which centered on the decision-making processes and experiences of FGLI students. Similarities and differences between how college access program participants and community college attendees made college choice choices and experienced their first year in college are outlined. The chapter also links the findings in this study with prior research on college choice, access programs, transfer pathways, and the role of institutional agents in the choiced process. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the mplications of this study, including the impact it could have on future research, practice and policymaking.

Study Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the decision-making processes and experiences of FGLI students who had aspirations to obtain a bachelor's degree and who had the option of attending an open admission community college or completing a summer college access program to gain acceptance into a four-year college. More specifically, the study aimed to provide greater insight into how FGLI students make college search decisions and to better understand the future implications of those decisions. By exploring both the decision-making processes and experiences of two

groups of FGLI students, I was able to make connections and present conclusions that have traditionally been examined individually.

I conducted focus groups with 20 students and follow-up interviews with six students in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the resources they accessed and the factors they considered most commonly during their respective college search process. After exaploring their decisions to participate in either a college access program at a four-year college or to enroll in a community college, I inquired about the continued support network FGLI students accessed and how their introduction to college and the specific institutional setting shaped their experiences.

Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice framed this study because it combines both economic models, which help explain why students make the decision to enroll in a particular college, as well as sociological models, which help explain how college decisions are made, while also considering external influences, including policymakers, high school structures, and the higher education landscape. In Perna's model, social capital comprises the center layer, and this study drew heavly on social capital theory as well as research on institutional agents to understand the access that FGLI students had to networks and resources and how that shaped both their college search process as well as their college experience. Modifying Perna's model to account specifically for institutional agents helped situate Stanton-Salazar's (2011) research, which advocated for conceptual models that consider how the educational attainment of youth is impacted by socialization and network relationships. More importantly, Stanton-Salazar encouraged interventions and advocated for school environments that help shift the power.

Discussion

Decision-Making Process

Participants in this study were asked to reflect on their college choice, describe the support they sought during the process, and to identify factors or characteristics most salient to them when making their decisions. A common thread throughout the findings was FGLI students' reliance on institutional agents and the social capital that students were able to acquire by leveraging the support of guidance counselors, family members, and peers.

Guidance counselors. College access program participants and community college attendees utilized the support of high school guidance counselors to acquire critical college search information. Support from guidance counselors was most prominent during the search phase of the college choice process and included individual and group meetings to provide advice on how to apply for college, create college lists, and apply for financial aid.

The accounts by college access program participants revealed that they met consistently, often monthly, to not only create lists of institutions to consider but also provide advice on program of study options. In some instances, study participants credited their guidance counselors with introducing them to—and encouraging them to pursue—the summer college-access program. This group of students referred to their counselors as people they talked to as friends and who would help determine which institution that was a better fit. College access program participants developed strong networks with this group of institutional agents and as a result increased their social capital. This was the first indication of a pattern among the college access program

participants, in which they either aligned themselves with institutional agents who could provide resources or made decisions that helped situate them in an environment that increased their likelihood to receive support.

Community college attendees also reported working with high school guidance counselors, but their interactions were more limited. Although one community college attendee indicated that her counselor had helped her apply to Rowan's EOF program, their conversation did not include a discussion of the six-week summer requirement, and therefore she was surprised to learn about this component. The community college attendee who had the strongest participant interaction with a high school guidance office referenced some individual meetings but also highlighted larger group sessions that focused on applying to college and completing the financial aid process. Many of the interactions community college attendees had with guidance counselors centered primarily on transactional discussions, including signing up for the SATs or submitting a high school transcript to a college.

The role that guidance counselors fulfilled for participants in this study fits Stanton-Salazar's (2011) description of institutional agents, those who can directly or indirectly provide underserved college populations access to valuable information. Consistent with the concept of social capital, students were able to access vital resources from counselors situated within the student's high school. The strength of the networks—measured in this study by the frequency of meetings and the value of the information exchanged—varied. Collectively, students who enrolled in a community college detailed less frequent meetings with guidance counselors than students who opted to complete a summer college-access program and then enroll in a four-year college. The type of

support participants received from high school guidance counselors also varied, and there appeared to be no mechanism within the students' high school environment to ensure that they received similar access to college counseling.

In her research, McDonough (2005) outlined that high school counselors impact the aspirations and enrollment patterns of high school students; when counselors work closely with students and parents, the likelihood that a student would enroll in a four-year college increased. McDonough's findings suggested that high school counselors lack specific training in college planning, experience role ambiguity, and face restraints that limit the amount of time they can dedicate to college planning.

Participants shared accounts of meeting with counselors to discuss potential colleges but rarely spoke of meetings with counselors after college decision letters and financial aid packages had been received. Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) identified three stages in the college search process; the support that counselors provided to participants in this study was situated within the search stage and did not appear to continue to the final stage, college choice.

During the final phase of the college choice process, students are more likely to compare specific institutions and also evaluate financial aid packages before ultimately selecting an institution to attend. This study's findings help illuminate the gap that exists between the search phase and the choice phase, and how the lack of involvement from guidance counselors during this timeframe may attribute to the likelihood that FGLI students will enroll in less selective institutions. When participants in this study described meeting with guidance counselors, the meetings typically focused on the earliest phase and involved helping to create lists of institutions for the student to consider. Similarly,

the information they received from guidance counselors pertaining to financial aid included the first step in the financial aid process: completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Participants did not share many accounts of meeting with their counselors during the choice phase, or the period between when students selected from the list of schools they had been accepted to and when they compared specific insitutions and the amount of financial aid they had received from each. Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) found that low-income students have less access to information about college costs, college requirements, and institutional types, accounting for differences in college attendance. Research conducted by Smith, Pender, and Howell (2013) indicated that disadvantaged populations often undermatch, or attend an institution that is less selective, than populations comprising individuals who are not the first in their family to attend college or are in a higher socioeconomic status. If the support that students, namely FGLI students, receive is not maintained throughout the duration of the college choice process, they may make uninformed decisions.

Parents, extended family members, and peers. Second to counselors, FGLI students leveraged the advice and support of parents and family members. Eight out of 20 of the participants in this study were not first-generation, and six of the students with parents who had prior college experience participated in a college access program and enrolled in a four-year college. College access program participants spoke of increased pressure from parents who had four-year college experience to attend a similar type institution and were discouraged from attending a community college. Although based on a small sample size, this study nevertheless highlighted the impact that having a parent with prior college experience can have on college enrollment decisions.

Study participants who were first-generation college students spoke of the challenges they experienced searching for colleges as a result of not having a parent or parents familiar with the process. In one example, a participant shared that her mother attended the "college nights" offered at her high school, but this exposure was not enough to overcome the mother's lack of understanding of the higher education system since she had not attended college and was not from the United States. Another participant shared an exchange he had had with his mother in which she decided he would go to a community college due to cost. Despite having worked with an after-school program that provided guidance around college requirements and securing funding, his brief but pointed exchange with his mother set the tone for his entire college search.

Participants often leveraged the relationships they had with extended family members and peers to access college information. College access program participants often associated with peer groups that were either considering four-year institutions or had experience in four-year institutions, which influenced their individual decision-making process. For example, one student of Somali descent did not have parents with prior college experience but was part of a network of friends who were also Somali and had experience in a four-year college. The comfort level resulting from being part of a group of friends who spoke the same language and could share the lessons they learned at a four-year college made this option more approachable.

College access program participants also shared more accounts of older siblings or cousins who spoke highly of their experience at a four-year institution, compared to the community college attendees. Although some participants made it clear that they did not want to follow in the exact footsteps of an older sibling by attending the same

college, they benefited from having conversations with relatives about what college would entail, and they gained valuable information from these individuals that could be used during the search and choice phases. The presence of a sibling or cousin at a four-year college represented a significant resource that college access program participants could leverage for key information. Whether it was a sibling, peer, or extended family member, college access program attendees often had a connection with someone who had experience at a four-year college.

When community college attendees were asked to discuss the networks they leveraged in the college search process, they also spoke of peers and extended family members, but the experiences of these influencers was often not positive and usually steered the students toward a community college. Two community college attendees spoke with extended family members who had four-year college experience, but the concerns they shared over cost and debt made community college seem like a more appealing option. A few community college attendees shared accounts of talking with other peers about college; however, in these examples, it was much more likely that members of the peer group were attending a community college. Similar to the college access program participants, the community college attendees spoke with peers who had positive college experience, and their presence at a community college made this a viable option.

College access program participants and community college attendees acknowledged receiving support in the form of social capital from older siblings, extended relatives, and peers, who often comprised one's habitus. Habitus has helped explain how the college choice process may differ for individuals (McDonough, 1997;

Perna & Titus, 2005) because "choices are bounded by the framework of opportunities and constraints the person finds himself/herself in" (Reay, 2004, p. 435). Participants in this study were restrained by the type and strength of relationships they had with parents, family member, and peers, which is consistent with Portes' (2000) research around social capital. In the case of this study, the degree to which participants could access parents, family members, and peers who had four-year college experience shaped the advice and support they received during the college search process. Engberg and Wolniak's (2010) research explored how the acquisition of social capital, among other types of capital, affects the type of institution a student attends. They determined that an increase in parent-to-parent interactions increased the likelihood that a student would enroll in a four-year institution and that the peer group a student associated with impacted the type of institution they attended.

College access program participants who did not have parents with prior college experience created networks of friends or family members who had experience in a four-year college; this in turn impacted or motivated their decision to attend a four-year college themselves. This was consistent with Ceja's (2006) study of 20 low-income, first-generation Chicana students in which he found that siblings served as role models, helping to create college-going expectations and also providing valuable college information, including guidance around which major or career to pursue.

Cost

In deciding to enroll at a particular school, both college access program participants and community college attendees considered cost above all other influences, including location, institutional type, and academic program offering. Participants

routinely declared that the decision came down to cost even if they were initially considering other factors. Focus group participants were asked to explain how they determined the true cost of attending an institution after financial aid was considered, and it became apparent that students struggled to make a distrinction between sticker price and out-of-pocket cost. Students who applied to the Equal Opportunity Fund program at Rowan Univeristy but then attended a community college because of the cost, failed to recognize the guaranteed aid the college access program would have provided as part of their acceptance. One college access program participant was persuaded by her mother to participate in the summer program as a result of the research she had conducted into the EOF office and the financial support it provides students. Her mother proactively reached out to the EOF office to better understand the PCI program and the support it would provide, and the conversation she had with staff provided a wealth of information about the aid her daughter would receive and how the program would assist in her transition to college. The interaction her mom had with Rowan also highlights the lack of understanding students have when it comes to finanicing a college education and the information they receive from college admission officers does not always provide the clarity needed to make informed college decisions. In this instance, without the intervention of a parent, the true benefits of the program may not have been realized, and a different college decision may have been made.

In deciding which institutions to apply to, students often eliminated out-of-state institutions, especially private institutions, in favor of in-state colleges because the published tuition costs of the latter were lower. Prior to applying for financial aid, the list of institutions being considered had in many cases already been narrowed down to a

handful of in-state public colleges. Many students acknowledged that they had considered private instituions initially, but the sticker price of those colleges raised concerns, and the students were often influenced by guidance counselors, friends, and/or parents to consider less expensive alternatives to avoid debt. The particpaints reported few instances of discussing other accepted measures of an institution's value, such as selectivity, quality of education, graduation rates, or after-college placement results. This suggested strongly that many FGLI students had narrowed down their college choices early in the process based on the perception of cost rather than an informed assessment of actual out-of-pocket cost, and on an incomplete understanding of the value of an institution. Although participants shared accounts of working with guidance counselors on an initial list of colleges to consider, they did not outline extensive conversations with counselors to better understand the value of attending one college over another, or to compare financial aid packages.

Previous research has highlighted the confusion students experience in deciphering between the sticker price and the net cost of college after aid is considered (Perna et al., 2008; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). Perna (2008) found that although there is a general reluctance to take out loans, students from low-resource schools have a greater propensity to avoid loans, are uncertain of the value proposition associated with taking out a loan, and often attend community colleges to avoid incurring debt. Although many participants identified the cost of college as the singlemost important factor in selecting an institution, many, when pressed, had not considered the net cost of attending after accounting for financial aid. This was particularly salient among the community college attendees, who seemed more influenced by the sticker price of college.

Additional research conducted by McDonough (2005) and Perna (2008) provided context for the challenges FGLI students face when trying to understanding cost, including the insufficient role guidance counselors play in this domain. In addition to being plagued by institutional resource restraints in general, guidance counselors are particularly hesitant to provide specific financial aid counseling due to a lack of training and the complexity associated with the financial aid application process. In their study, Perna et al. (2008) found that well-resourced schools were more likely to offer one-on-one financial aid counseling, and counselors at these schools felt more comfortable sharing information about specific state aid for which students might be eligible. Although it was beyond the scope of this study to investigate the resource levels of the high schools the participants had attended, there were few accounts of one-on-one financial aid counseling from guidance counselors, suggesting this service was not generally available, despite the wide need for it.

College Access Program Decision Making

As mentioned previously, college access program participants gained social capital from guidance counselors, peers, and siblings, and utilized the resources from this network to make college choice choices. A similar pattern became evident when focus group participants opened up about their consideration of attending a summer college-access program.

College access program participants and community college attendees were asked about their perceptions of the letter they received from the four-year college regarding their participation in a college access program. Although participants' emotional reactions varied, college access program participants generally discussed the option with

many people before making a decision. From Upward Bound staff, guidance counselors, and college administrators to parents, siblings, and peers, college access program participants were encouraged by a large network to complete the summer program.

Many college access program participants were initially ambivalent about completing the summer program and recounted conversations they had had with peers who had either completed the program previously or were also invited to participate. College access program participants received advice and sometimes even pressure from students who had previously completed the summer program, from friends who had also been invited to complete it, from guidance counselors, and from family members. Two college access program participants determined initially that they did not want to attend but then received pressure from their network to reconsider. Participants also made reference to reaching out to the staff at the university that helped coordinate the summer programs to seek clarification, which quickly turned to encouragement to participate.

These interactions and conversations positively influenced students to participate in a summer program and, ultimately, enroll in a four-year college. It became clear that college access program participants had access to greater social capital and consciously or subconsciously selected college options that would lead to the development of even more social capital. The acquisition of social capital, which began during the college search phase for college access program participants, continued during the college choice phase.

Community college attendees shared more limited accounts of discussing college with guidance counselors, and the peer and family networks they accessed either had limited exposure to four-year colleges or expressed negativity about attending a four-year

college based on cost. Their limited access to social capital became even more apparent in their consideration of the college access program. During the focus group, two community college attendees were not aware they had been invited to complete a summer program as a condition of their acceptance to UMass Boston. Another participant misunderstood the opportunity and thought he had been referred to the program because he had not taken a TOEFL language proficiency exam. Their limited understanding of available opportunities, and the limited conversations they had with counselors, friends, and peers, often led them to dismiss the program without much consideration. As noted previously, FGLI students often have inadequate access to information during the college search process and therefore make decisions that are under-informed. The confusion that some participants' experienced regarding the letter they received from admissions about the summer college access program further illustrated the deficit at which this group often operates compared to more advantaged peers who have parents with prior college experience and who have access to more resources. My study's findings also revealved that FGLI students were often unable to access the support needed from guidance counselors, admissions officers, friend sand family putting them at a disadvantage when selecting an institution to attend.

Experience

This study sought to understand and compare the experiences of FGLI students who pursued different paths to higher education. Specifically, the study investigated how the first-year experience of students who had completed a summer college-access program as a condition of their acceptance into a four-year college compared to the first-year experience of students who enrolled directly in a community college. Participants

were asked to reflect on their interactions with faculty and staff, their engagement with peers, and their participation in campus activities during their first year of college. Participants who attended a four-year college had the additional experience of attending a summer college-access program, highlighted here as part of the four-year college experience.

Experience of college access program participants. Summer college-access program participants at both UMass Boston and Rowan University credited the program with improving their transition to college. Both programs placed significant emphasis on developing academic skills that are vital to student success in college. This typically included a focus on reading and writing. The DSP program participants vividly recalled the theme of the program and the ways in which it incorporated reading and writing assignments into the curriculum. DSP and Rowan students both reflected on the improvements they saw in their writing skills over the summer and at times had a hard time recognizing an assignment they had completed at the end of the program as their own.

In addition to academic skills, most of the college access program participants identified three other benefits of the program: making connections, building time-management skills, and becoming familiar with the expectations of college-level work. Although students shared individual accounts about how these objectives were accomplished, it became apparent that the summer program contributed to every student's level of confidence in making the transition to higher education. Students gained confidence in their writing skills, particularly the notion of rewriting assignments and seeking clarity from faculty. Participants also became more confident with each other

and with utilizing the support of faculty and staff. The summer program brought a group of students together for an intensive six-week experience, and the students quickly developed close connections. Although the highly structured nature of the programs was at times criticized, students grew more confident in their ability to organize their schedule in a manner that made keeping up with college requirements achieveable. Lastly, the confidence of the group increased when they began in the fall sememster, since the expectations were familiar and because the initial content being assigned comprised a review of the work they had completed over the summer.

The exposure college access program students had to faculty, staff, and peers helped created a comfortable, more familiar environment for students to return to in the fall. Collectively, the accounts students shared regarding their involvement in activities, outreach to staff in the college access program office, and interaction with faculty in their classes portrayed a student population that was engaged more fully in the college experience.

Within the academic setting, college access program participants revealed an increasing level of informal and formal engagement with faculty. Students met routinely with faculty to review assignments or sent drafts of papers for feedback; they also had informal encounters with faculty, such as conversations in the hallway before class, during breaks, or in the cafeteria. It was not uncommon for participants to specifically name a staff member from the college access program office whom they had met with to discuss a concern on campus or to talk about their future. If they were not seeking the direct support of the college access program office staff, they were utilizing the support of the tutoring center or advising center, and they credited the summer program with

introducing them and encouraging them to utilize these services. Although some participants did not feel as much of a need to seek out the support of the college access program staff, they knew where the office was located and could easily approach staff members if needed.

Beyond the academics, college access program participants discussed the continuing friendships that they forged in the summer. From finding a roommate and a best friend to creating a study group, college access program participants saw familiar faces in their classes with whom they shared an instant bond. The summer program also paved the way for higher level engagement on campus as a result of the participants meeting peer mentors during the summer who were also campus leaders for many clubs and organizations. The comfort of knowing someone in a club or organization leadership position increased their likelihood of becoming involved. Increased enagagement on campus and a heightened sense of belonging have been tied to higher rates of retention and completion rates, and a higher level of overall satisfaction with the college experience.

It is not possible to decouple students' experiences in the summer from those in the fall. Unlike many of the college access programs that have been researched (many of which are federally funded and attempt to engage or align with institutions of higher education) the summer college program in this study provided students the skills needed to succeed in the specific college environment they were about to enter. Both the alignment and oversight of the program ensured that what students experienced in the summer would be consistent and would provide the best possible preparation for their experience in the fall.

Although there is no single approach for evaluating college access programs, and many of the programs that have been evaluated are in large part federally funded, Hooker and Brand's (2009) review of 23 college and career programs provided a basis for analysis in the current study. Consistent among the 23 evaluated programs was a set of 10 characteristics common to the programmatic and structural successes of high-functioning programs. The programs at UMass Boston and Rowan exhibited some of these success elements, including a focus on rigor and academic support, relationships, and college knowledge and access. Programs recognized for their rigor and supportiveness in Hooker and Brand's (2009) review possessed strong curriculua, were accelerated, and provided tutoring and academic support. All of these qualities were apparent in the programs at UMass Boston and Rowan, and they provided students who did not initially meet the admissions requirements the opportunity to gain the academic skills and knowledge of support networks necessary for success. Hooker and Brand (2009) also advocated for programs that help students build relationships and provide not only college knowledge but also access to higher education. An advantage of the programs at Rowan and UMass Boston was that in teaching students how to access support networks and how to make connections, they were doing so in the students' actual college environment.

Experience of community college students. This study examined the largest aspirational segment of the community college population—that is, those hoping to complete a bachelor's degree—and asked participants to reflect on the completion of their first year in college. The community college students shared positive accounts of their experiences and felt they had gained valuable skills. When asked to elaborate on the skills they had gained and how they had benefited from their the community college

experiences, they indicated that they had become more comfortable with the way higher education operates and more confident navigating the systems. A few community colleges students felt more capable of managing their time and believed they had become more outgoing as a result of their experiences.

Regarding the degree to which they had developed relationships with faculty and staff, their experiences differed from that of the four-year college students. Community college attendees spoke highly of the faculty they interacted with and praised them for being approachable. They also described their faculty as serving in a dual capacity, as teachers and also as advisors assisting with registration needs. A few community college attendees provided examples of reaching out to advising or support offices, but they never identified a staff member by name—a stark contrast to the students who had completed a summer college-access program.

In describing their community college experiences, participants appeared to exercise somewhat more independence than the four-year college participants, often registering without the assistance of a specific advisor or utilizing online tools promoted by the college, for instance. This them of independence, or lack of ties to the campus, continued in their descriptions of their level of engagement on campus. A few students outlined some involvement in campus activities and felt that the community college had given them an opportunity to be more engaged than they had been in high school. However, many equated their experience with simply taking classes and did not provide descriptions associated with a more fully engaged college experience. Those community college students who wanted to be more engaged felt that the options at the college were

limited, while others did not express a desire to be involved at all beyond their coursework.

Most of the participants were preoccupied with how their academic experience at the community college would differ from what they may experience in their next academic setting; they were also uncertain about the institution to which they would transfer. Unlike the college access program participants, who were far more settled on their college choice and did not express thoughts about the institution they would attend, community college attendees openly discussed meeting with transfer staff at area colleges to begin making arrangements. They felt supported in this endeavor and had found peers who were attempting to make the same transition. If they expressed any hesitation, it was in relation to the extent to which they would face a more rigorous academic experience at a four-year college.

The focus groups occurred the summer after their first year in college, and only one community college student had withdrawn (for medical reasons). Although it may be premature to draw conclusions about the impact attending a community college has on degree aspirations, the participants did share their desire to continue their education. Some had made plans to stay until they completed their associate degree while others hoped to transfer earlier. In both instances, pursing their bachelor's degree remained a goal for this group.

The degree to which community colleges are fulfilling their collective mission remains a subject of debate among researchers. This study provided evidence that community colleges gave the FGLI students open access to higher education and that they remained focused on continuing their education beyond the first year. However,

their experiences, namely the networks they were able to create with peers and staff, and the academic rigor they experienced, were not consistent with those of the four-year college participants. Earlier studies that have attempted to control for differences in socioeconomic status and academic preparation have found that a lack of connection to the campus and low expectations by faculty may contribute to lower bachelor's-degree completion rates (Alfonso, 2006). Community college participants in this study did not have the same level of engagement as four-year college students and expressed concerns about whether the academic experience would provide the background needed to succeed after transferring.

Equally debated by researchers is the degree to which community college "heats up" a student's intentions to complete a bachelor's degree (Zwerling, 1976)—or has the reverse effect of "cooling out" their educational goals (Clark, 1960). My study's findings provided no evidence of students changing their focus as they remained steadfast about completing their bachelor's degree. However, there were early warning signs that students would experience transfer shock as a result of students having to adjust to a second college environment (Townsend & Wilson, 2008). Community college participants were keenly aware that they would need to adjust to yet another higher education community, and while they believed the community college had prepared them in some senses, they still felt a general unease about what the next step would look like.

Implications

As a scholar, I approached this study with the goal of better understanding the challenges faced by FGLI students—challenges that I understand intimately, since they were part of my own college experience. Although a fair amount of temporal distance

separates my college search from that of the participants in this study, in many respects, similar challenges remain. This study demonstrated that the access FGLI students have to college choice information varies, and their experiences also vary based on the pathways they pursue to higher education. Students in this study, especially college access program participants, were more intentional about seeking support from guidance counselors or were able to access a friend or family member that could share insights on a four-year college experience which influenced their decision-making process. Similar prior research has offered insight into the limited resources and social capital FGLI students are able to leverage during the college search process. Earlier studies have also determined that FGLI students are more likely to enroll in two-year colleges, have a greater tendency to attend part-time, and are far less likely to persist to completion of their bachelor's degree.

As a practitioner, my administrative responsibilities at a four-year public institution routinely place me in a position to serve as an institutional agent for FGLI students. It is not unusual for me to guide a transfer student who wants to make the transition to a four-year college or to be asked to welcome a group of students who are beginning the institution's summer college-access program. Therefore, I approached this study with the goal of understanding how effective both short-term summer college-access programs at four-year colleges and community colleges can be in building social capital.

Equally important, and a goal of this research, is creating conversation among state policymakers who are in a position to allocate resources or propose future strategies for creating an equitable experience for all college-going populations, especially FGLI

students. Current strategies supported by state higher education offices and public officials seem to favor improving and enhancing the student pathway between community colleges and four-year institutions instead of looking for alternatives that introduce FGLI students to a four-year institution immediately. This research explored that approach and compared it to a summer college-access program as an alternative approach.

Implications for Practice

High school guidance counselors and teachers, admissions professionals, and college access program administrators were all identified in this study as playing a role in disseminating valuable information about the college search process to students or providing support for navigating college. It is important that these professionals recognize the role they play in providing social capital, especially to FGLI students. The access that college-going populations have to resources is not equitable; however, institutional agents at both secondary and postsecondary institutions are in a position—and have the responsibility—to balance the scales. By understanding the areas in which FGLI students may need greater support, institutional agents can begin to deliver resources and services that meet this population's needs.

Secondary environment. For institutional agents working within the high school environment, the college counseling role cannot begin and end with the creation of a list of colleges and an explanation of application requirements. Although the capacity of these agents to provide college counseling is already limited due to a variety of resource restraints, it is important to recognize that FGLI students need assistance understanding admissions decisions, deciphering financial aid packages, and making informed college

selections. Three specific areas must be addressed by guidance counselors during their consultations with college-bound students:

- Admissions decisions: Letters from college admissions offices may contain contingencies that students need to consider or explore further. Guidance counselors must inquire into the decision a student has received from a college in an effort to provide clarity or at the very least help connect the student with a resource at the college who can provide further explanation.
- Financial aid packages: FGLI students in this study were able to identify resources within their high school or community for assisting with completion of the FAFSA, but that counseling did not extend to helping students and parents decipher and compare actual financial aid award letters, or understand the actual cost to enroll at university.
- College selection: As this study found, it was common practice for guidance counselors to work with FGLI students to create lists of colleges to apply to, but less often did counselors help students compare their college options. Specific meetings with FGLI students must focus on explaining institutional differences as well as retention- and graduation-rate variances between institutions.

This study determined that FGLI students, as well as their family, need support throughout the entire college search process, particularly when the college choice decision is being made. Understanding the complexity of financial aid, namely the amount a student or family will actually need to pay at a particular college, cannot be clarified in a group session that is designed to provide advice on how to complete the

FAFSA. FGLI students need individual counseling to help them comprehend the details of the aid packages they received from each institution after completing the FAFSA so they can understand the true out-of-pocket cost of attendance. They also need help understanding how their enrollment at a particular institution affects the likelihood of degree completion.

There has been progress around increasing financial literacy and teaching students to successfully apply for financial aid. Tools like the Net Price Calculator and the College Scorecard have become federally mandated requirements and are designed to provide college-bound students with valuable information, including average annual costs of colleges, four-year graduation rates, and post-graduation salaries. However, simply getting a student to complete the FAFSA and having college completion information available is not enough; guidance counselors should actively assist FGLI students in utilizing these data to aid their college assessment. It is likely, if used in conjunction with guidance counselor meetings, that these tools will help FGLI students better understand the implications of attending one institution over another and begin to level out the disparities in FGLI student enrollment at less selective institutions.

Postsecondary education. Institutions of higher education often declare their commitment to fostering diverse environments that include FGLI students. If they are to fulfill this commitment by providing an equitable experience for this population, they must expand their offerings to include summer programs that give students who do not meet the stated admissions requirements access to the institution and to the resources they need to succeed. Summer college-access programs that help students develop their reading and writing skills and also allow FGLI students the opportunity to become

comfortable with the college environment prior to enrolling in the fall semester will help build students' confidence. Summer college-access programs also provide opportunities for FGLI students to connect with peers, faculty, and administrators who will serve as later resources when they begin their academic experience at the institution in the fall.

Higher education institutions must recognize that students who complete a summer program will likely seek the continued support of administrators associated with the program after enrolling at the college; therefore, institutions should appropriately address staffing levels to meet the needs of this population. Such support may range from assistance with class assignments and coursework to more general meetings to address students' questions or concerns about their college experiences. The specific support that FGLI students seek from these key administrators must be factored into their workload and may require the hiring of additional staff or upper-class peer administrators to ensure that adequate support is available.

Likewise, community colleges must also be intentional about providing first-time freshmen avenues for developing their social capital by connecting students with peers who share similar goals of obtaining a four-year degree and with administrators who can help students understand college expectations and become comfortable with the transition to higher education. Community colleges provide access for a diverse population of students who possess a wide range of educational goals. If community colleges are going to support their largest audience—those with aspirations to complete a four-year degree—they need to help these students develop peer groups made up of individuals holding similar aspirations and to incorporate many of the experiences they would have received they had enrolled directly in a four-year college.

Higher education institutions that already offer conditional-acceptance summer college-access programs need to be more proactive in working with students, parents, and counselors to clarify the admissions process after acceptance. Students and parents may not understand the conditions of the acceptance and may also not be aware of the financial aid opportunities available to students who complete college access programs. Higher education admissions professionals need to be more proactive in promoting these unrecognized or under-utilized opportunities and must align their efforts with guidance counselors so they are aware of students' college acceptances and can help head off any confusion about those issued decisions.

Implications for Research

Prior research on college choice, the transfer process, and college access programs has been extensive; yet, gaps still exist. This study contributed findings that offer practical insights into all three areas and, most importantly, attempt to bridge college choice research and college experience research, which have traditionaly been conducted separately. Future research should continue in all three areas while also seeking opportunities to design studies that focus on the decision-making process and the college experience together.

College choice. Although labor-intensive and time-consuming, more qualitative research is needed around the college choice process and how the experiences of underrepresented or underserved students in higher education differ from those of more privileged students. Quantitative research has shown that some populations are more likely to enroll at institutions that are closer to home or that appear to be more affordable. However, it is not until one has a conversation with an FGLI student does he or she learn,

for instance, that they wanted to attend an out-of-state college or that family responsibilities and the perceived lack of a safety net deferred their dream. It is also easy to make claims that FGLI students are more price-sensitive and attend colleges that are less expensive. Indeed, the focus groups and follow-up interviews in this study revealed that many FGLI students, after learning the sticker price of a college, never attempted to ascertain the net cost of attendance (i.e., after factoring in financial aid). Therefore, future research should first evaluate the extent to which FGLI students consider the difference between sticker price and net cost early in the college search process, and then examine the degree to and manner in which they conduct this comparision during the final decision-making stage.

College access programs. A consistent criticism of college access program research is that it lacks a common approach for evaluating the services provided and, as a result, is unable to make strong recommendations about which services are most effective. Additionally, I would argue that current research on college access programs has focused too heavily on federally funded programs because of their history and budget implications and has not explored the large sector of programs that are privately or institutionally funded. Research has also taken an overly broad approach to understanding college access programs and has thereby failed to recognize the nuances of specific programs. For example, this study focused on college access programs that were connected directly to a four-year institution and guaranteed acceptance into the institution upon completion. The just-in-time nature of this type of college access program and the benefits of tailoring it to a specific institution warrant further research.

In addition, longitudinal studies of FGLI students who selected different pathways to college must be investigated further. As scholarly and political focus shifts from college access to college completion, it is critical to understand how enrollment decisions and college experiences impact the graduation rates of FGLI students.

Implications for Policymakers

The timing of this study was not coincidental. College enrollment is uncertain, especially in the northeastern United States, where the number of high school graduates is declining. Thus, the outlook to 2025 remains uncertain. At the same time, unduplicated enrollment in the community college sector in Massachusetts and New Jersey dropped by 15% and 16%, respectively, between 2011 and 2016. Meanwhile, state higher education offices in both states have launched initiatives to ease the transfer process between two-year and four-year colleges. The governors of both states have earmarked substantial funding to help community colleges increase early-college options. In the backdrop, individual states throughout the nation are considering or implementing plans to make community college free, and similar programs have been recommended at the federal level.

Yet, the community college sector remains the lowest funded sector of higher education while being called upon to provide a wide range of services to an extremely diverse population. Moreover, despite increases in college access, FGLI students still lag far behind more advantaged populations in completion of a college degree.

It is therefore imperative that policymakers search for more than one solution to providing FGLI students access to an equitable college experience—solutions that will also increase college completion rates. The community college pathway is certainly one

option, but it has proven challenging. Innovative, short-term college access programs that provide conditional admission to FGLI students who otherwise would not meet four-year college admissions requirements should be mandated at all public four-year colleges. This approach would expedite the delivery of academic skills and help students create the support networks they need to succeed in college. This approach would be comparable to recent initiatives to help students progress more quickly though developmental courses . Many states have collaborated with higher education to implement models, especially in math, that allow students to quickly gain the skills they need and to progress through several semesters' worth of developmental math in a shorter period of time. Borrowing from this approach, scholars and practitions need to seek opportunities for FGLI students to quickly acquire skills for success, and this work is most effective when it is aligned directly with the college the student plans to attend.

Research has shown that connecting students to support services and to campus mentors enhances their college experiences and increases the likelihood they will persist to graduation. Current approaches to making community colleges even more affordable and accessible have begun to focus on the college enrollment gap but have yet to address the resource restraints already present in this sector of higher education. As policymakers consider options for making community college more accessible and affordable, and attempt to align curricula and transfer credit policies, they must also address the gaps in student engagement and connections with the community.

Conclusion

In order for the college graduation rates of first-generation and low-income students to improve, this population needs to be challenged to critically consider the type

of institution they attend. Without such a change, FGLI students will continue to be disproportionally represented within the community college sector. Conclusions drawn from this study indicate that FGLI students who enrolled in a community college, without considering a summer college-access program, would have benefitted from having an informed conversation with a guidance counselor about the advantages of completing such a program and then enrolling in a four-year college. The notion that enrolling in a community college and then transfering to a four-year college provides the same experience as enrolling in a four-year college directly has been debunked by previous research as well as the current study. Counselors must also understand, and need to articulate to students, that a summer college-access program will likely connect students with administrators who can serve as mentors and advocates and help students navigate their new college environment.

Community colleges represent a viable option for students beginning their higher education experience, and students can expect to be greeted by faculty accustomed to serving in a dual teaching-advising role. However, as confirmed by this study, community college attendees do not have the same exposure to or develop the same bonds with administrators, support staff, and peers as their four-year college counterparts. Community college attendees are also keenly aware that they will need to eventually make the transition to another college to receive their bachelor's degrees, and they often have lingering concerns about their academic experiencse and whether they will match the intensity of the four-year institution. For this reason, guidance counselors must be upfront with FGLI students about the differences that exist between the two pathways so that they can make informed and confident college decisions.

APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUPS PROTOCOL

I. Questions focused on the decision-making process for first-generation and low-income students that participated in a college access program:

a. Tell us your college search process, including when you first started looking at colleges and who may have assisted you with the search?
    i. If you had assistance with the college choice or college decision-making process, talk about the type of support you received?

b. What factors led you to select the institution you are attending?

c. Were you concerned about the selectivity of a school or whether an institution was a two-year college or a four-year college?

d. How did you react to being invited to participate in a summer college access program?
    i. Did you discuss the program with anyone at the institution or outside the institution before deciding to participate?

II. Questions focused on the decision-making process for first-generation and low-income students that did not participate in a college access program:

a. Tell us your college search process, including when you first started looking at colleges and who may have assisted you with the search?
    i. If you had assistance with the college choice or college decision-making process, talk about the type of support you received?

b. Were you concerned about the selectivity of a school or whether an institution was a two-year college or a four-year college?

c. How did you react to being invited to participate in a summer college access program?
    i. Did you discuss the program with anyone at the institution or outside the institution before declining the offer?

d. What factors led you to the decision not to participate in a college access program and to instead enroll at a community college?

III. Questions focused on the first-year experience of first-generation and low-income college students that participated in a college access program and then enrolled in a four-year college:

a. What type of academic and social experiences did you encounter during the summer college access program? Provide examples for how you may have benefited from the program as well as examples for how the program may not have met your expectations?

b. Have you maintained contact with any of the faculty, staff or students you met during the college access program, and if so, talk about your current relationship with these individuals?

    i. Follow-up questions may include asking about involvement in activities and/or meetings they have had with faculty during office hours.

IV. Questions focused on the first-year experience of first-generation and low-income college students that did not participated in a college access program and instead enrolled in a two-year college:

a. What type of academic and social experiences did you encounter during your first two semesters of college?
    i. Follow-up questions may including asking about involvement in activities and/or meetings they have had with faculty during office hours.

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

First Name_____ Last Name _____

Email Address_____ Cell Phone Number_____

Institution you are currently attending _____

Pseudonym: _____

Family Educational Level:

Did your mother attend college? Yes No

If yes please answer the following questions:

Which college/university? _____

Did she earn a degree? Yes No

If yes, what type of degree? _____

Did your father attend college? Yes No

If yes please answer the following questions:

Which college/university?

_____

Did he earn a degree? Yes No

If yes, what type of degree? _____

Financial Aid Information:

Did you apply for financial Aid? Yes No

If yes, did you receive a Pell Grant? Yes No

College Enrollment Information:

How many courses did you complete in the fall semester? _____

Please list the courses you completed in the fall semester:

_____

How many courses did you complete in the spring semester? _____

Please list the courses you completed in the spring semester:

_____

Have you withdrawn from any courses up to this point in your college career? Yes No

What is your current GPA? _____

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